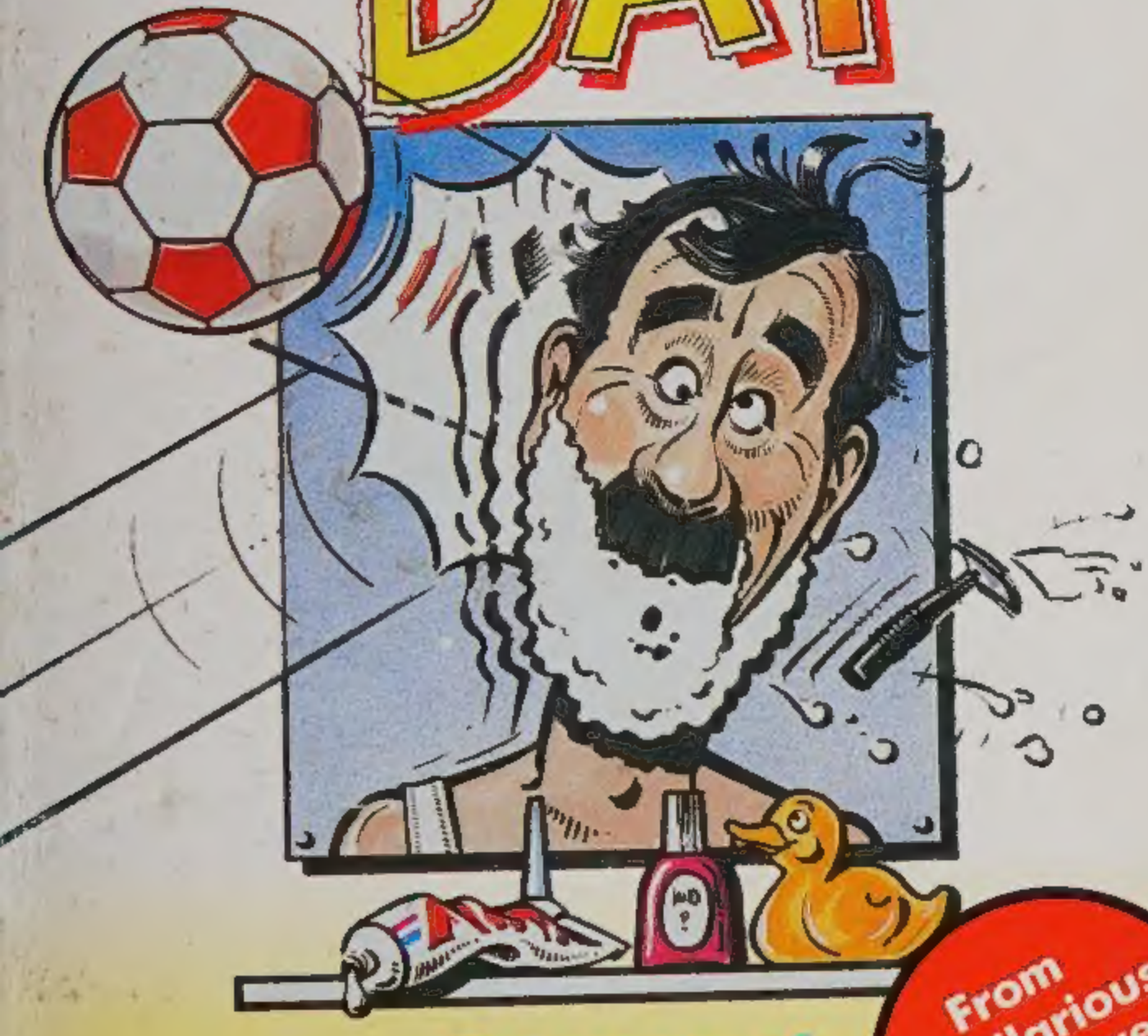
The Best of FATHER'S DAY



From the hilarious, much-loved PUNCH column.

Ten years of teenagers

Hunter Davies

THE BEST OF FATHER'S DAY

If it's Monday it's the Sobell Centre. Flora goes there every week for her gym class, along with twenty or so other six-year-olds. I also take Sarah and Jessie from our local streets which in theory means I should only be ferrying them every third week but you know what it's like, working from home, hanging about, so I seem to spend half my life dashing to the Sobell. It's a huge sports centre in Islington and getting there after school is easy, but coming back is murder, throwing them in the back of the car, counting the seconds, cutting illegally down back alleys, desperate to beat the rush hour.

I always stay while they have their hour's gym, though when the other two mums do their turn, they usually come home in between. Well, what else have I got to do? I'm actually too mean with the petrol to do a double journey. I also like wandering down the Seven Sisters Road while I'm putting in the hour. It's probably the ugliest, noisiest, dirtiest street in north London, but I know a fruit shop where you can get nine lemons for 25p. I admit they're rather small and usually soggy and my wife says she won't use them, but it thrills me every week to bring them home.

About the author

Hunter Davies is the author of over thirty books, ranging from biographies of the Beatles to William Wordsworth, plus an awful lot of journalism, notably on *The Sunday Times* and in *Punch*, where he wrote the Father's Day column for ten years. He also writes books for children, including the Flossie Teacake stories and the S.T.A.R.S. series for teenagers. He has three children, all still speaking to him, a wife (the novelist Margaret Forster), and flits between London and the Lake District.

THE BEST OF FATHER'S DAY

Ten Years of Teenagers

Hunter Davies

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For Caitlin, Jake and Flora, with further fatherly apologies.

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Introduction

For ten years, when the world was young and the bedrooms full, I did a weekly column about my family which appeared in the magazine *Punch*. Nothing remarkable about it really, just the odd jottings by a dad about his children, no tragedies, few dramas, hardly any pack drills, though lots of names, real names, the names of my own dear children. I suppose in a way that was vaguely remarkable: the fact that someone should apparently expose his loved ones to even a very small shaft of limelight.

When I began, I decided not to use any soppy euphemisms, such as Child Number One, or the Son and Heir, or Our Last Little Treasure, as I always suspect that once people make up names, they make up stories and incidents to go with them. So from the beginning, I wrote about Caitlin, Jake and Flora, real members of the planet, who were aged around thirteen, eleven and six when the articles first appeared. Should I have spared them? Should I have disguised their identities? Perhaps. You can judge for yourself.

I remember when I was at school in Carlisle, oh not the olden days again, give us a break, you haven't even begun the book yet, we had the Mayor's Son in our class for a while. Name dropper. Yes, that's the sort of silly remark we used to make. In a place like Carlisle, there weren't any well known people. There was no chance of someone's dad being in a pop group, or Parliament or doing something really famous, such as reading the weather forecast on television. So we picked on the Mayor's son instead. Every time he came into the class room we all stood up and said

Arise, It's The Mayor's Son. How pathetic. We must have made his life hell, but he took it well.

My three children, at inner London comprehensives, have had far worse problems to cope with in their life, as any parent with children at such schools in the last ten years will know, and I don't honestly think I made it worse for them with their peers by drawing attention to them. Who reads *Punch* anyway. Certainly not their school friends. At Caitlin's school, which was Camden School for Girls, see I can name it now as she's long since left, there were girls with really famous parents, such as Cabinet Ministers and Women Novelists and TV Presenters, so it was not done to make mention of parents or their doings. Jake's school, William Ellis, also had a share of the passing famous. Flora's school, which I will not name, as she's still there, is not quite the same, but it's equally not done to enquire about parents.

What did happen, though, over the years, was that one or two teachers would pick up old copies in a dental waiting-room, or even turn out to have a subscription, and they would make elliptical comments in the corridor. This really annoyed them, especially Jake, and for a while he insisted that his name had to be changed. For a few months he became Jimmy, then he forgave me. But all the time he was at University I was not allowed to name which one, though I did when he finally left, as you will see, hurry hurry to page 217.

I saw the articles as Letters to my Mum, the sort of weekly chitchat we all pass on to our own parents, picking on the nice things, flamming up the little incidents, carefully avoiding anything too nasty or tragic. I was simply economical when it came to anything unhappy, and naturally, like all families, over ten years, we have had our share.

They were written every Saturday night, a consideration of that week's domestic highlights, or low lights, or just any flickers I could latch on to as we all struggled through the Eighties, not knowing where we were going, except into the Nineties, so we all hoped. Looking back, patterns did emerge, characters did develop, a sort of narrative grew up, mainly because of the three children. There were surprises,

especially to us, when Caitlin did things we never expected, or Jake turned out to be rather different from the image I might have given about him in the early years. Readers seemed to identify with them, especially those with similar aged children, going through similar aged problems, what am I saying, similar pleasures. A series which was meant to run for only six weeks, when it began on October 17, 1979, ran and ran till 1989, till I was out of breath, and practically out of copy, as by then the older two had become students, and almost, if not quite, going out into the big wide world.

Readership surveys indicated that it became the most popular column in *Punch*, so Alan Coren used to tell me. (And it was his idea in the first place, so I always believed everything he said.) It even became a TV series, with John Alderton starring as me. I got fan mail from all over the world, and so did Caitlin at one time. While the kids at their own schools took little notice, there was a following from public schools, and in student common rooms.

In all, I wrote 428 columns, how did I spin it out, which explains why I'm now sitting here exhausted, after chucking out nine-tenths of them for this definitely the last, never to be seen again, ultimate appearance of Father's Day.

Actually, it was quite easy. What I chucked out was Me. I was surprised how often in these last ten years I have been grinding on about my health. In a dull week, it's what I always seemed to come back to, whether my dodgy knee or my sore jaw. I also chucked out columns that were mainly about my obsessions or collections, dead exciting though they are, as I think no one will be interested in them in book form. Perhaps they never were, in *Punch*, but readers put up with them as they waited for the latest on les enfants. I eliminated all the holiday columns, even though they were about family holidays, such as us in Russia, which I was very fond of, and the Lake District.

There were no columns about my wife. She can do her own, and correct any false impressions. I never knew what to call her. Having said I'm against soppy euphemisms, I found myself in the early years calling her my Lady Wife,

or Mrs Davies. I didn't want to use her real name. Dunno why. Spare her, I suppose. The column's title referred to me, and my views and experiences on being your average sort of middle-class, middling caring sort of Dad. When I began, there seemed to be more than enough stuff being written by the nation's *Guardian* Women about their family lives and heroic struggles. For a while, I classed her as a Wrinkly, along with me, then I fell into the habit of calling her the Old Trout, and then just the OT. I had thought, till I ploughed through these 428 columns, that I had used that term from almost the beginning, but I see it didn't start till about half-way through. I got a lot of complaints about calling her the Old Trout, from people saying it was nasty, unfair, disrespectful to a wonderful woman and human being. She never minded. Honest.

I've decided here to concentrate on the three children, to follow them through, as they grew up, so that the book has in fact a sort of shape, even a story, to keep you turning the pages till you come to, well, I can't say the end. There is never an end, once you become a father or a mother. As long as you're here, and they're here, the family sagas go on. I stopped at a pause mark, when Caitlin and Jake, touch wood, look as if they are about to leave home. If you are really desperate, when you've read this offering, to know what happened next, send me a stamped envelope and I'll do an update every Christmas. Personally, I can't wait. Every evening, over the cocoa, we still come out with the same old stuff which all parents do. 'Whatever will become of them . . .' Here is the story so far, about what became of them, over the last ten years.

Hunter Davies
London NW5
Jan. 1990

My First Teenager

Caitlin is thirteen going on twenty-four and she's my first teenager. I've always felt completely prepared, being a man of the world, having read all the articles about teenagers, having made vows never to be restrictive like my parents, having been such a terrific dad all these years, etc.

'Dad,' she said on the phone one day last week, 'I'm in a boy's flat in Kilburn. OK?' It was seven at night and I was on my own as my wife was in hospital. I felt a sense of panic, but I took it in chronological order. First of all, why was she calling me Dad when for thirteen years I've been Hunt? I decided it was part of the barriers going up, keeping me in my place as an outsider dad figure. Which boy's flat and were his parents there? Well, one mustn't pry. At least she'd rung. And then Kilburn! My God, it's miles away, full of bomb factories. I realised she'd told me nothing. No phone number, no address, no return time. And she's only thirteen.

I was in bed when she came home, just after 10.30, very pleased with herself—pleased that she'd done me such a huge favour by dragging herself to a phone. Great. When you wake up drugged in Buenos Aires I'll at least know it all began in some anonymous boy's flat in some anonymous part of north London. I didn't actually say that. Jokes can rebound. I just muttered my thanks, terribly grateful, very good of you, what a thoughtful girl, your worship, oh great one, just as long as you can manage a quick ring to tell your old dad. What a creep I am. But that's what we've both become, me and her mum. Ever so thankful for any crumb. If we're very good, she tells us things.

She did give us all the gen about the punk rock concert last Sunday at the Roundhouse, after it was over. She'd crept out and got dressed at someone else's house. Avoiding me, the great permissive dad. Yet I gave her everything money can't buy. She'd gone in an old man's shirt and tie, pins and chains everywhere, a mask of make-up on her face and her hair red rinsed. ('It's only cochineal—it washes out.') She came back exhausted; what with spitting at the group on stage. If the group spits at the audience, as they did, then naturally you spit back. Her shirt was blood-stained, or so it looked. Turned out to be tomato sauce. Another group had used sliced loaves in their act, pouring ketchup all over them, then thrown them at the audience. Very musical. The dye had run in her hair, thanks to people emptying beer glasses on her. She also came back with more badges than she'd gone with. Some badge seller got himself mugged and she just happened to pick up a few lost badges. Just a joke, she said. I'm not a punk, not even a closet punk, but if you go to a punk concert, you've got to wear the clothes haven't you. Quite right, I said.

When I was thirteen I used to sneak my school trousers to a woman in the street who narrowed them for a shilling and pinch my dad's Brylcreem to grease back my hair. Not that boring story again, she said, and she was gone. I remember him once trying to stop me riding my bike on Sunday. I was always determined not to be like my dad. But the kids these days want to do more than the things we weren't allowed to do. (Gee, thanks, you mean I can go on my bike to next Sunday's punk concert . . .) Life has all moved on.

It suddenly happened two months ago, these lads started hanging round the door. I thought at first they were wanting me to come out and play football and went to look for my boots. Then Caitlin's gang of girls appeared, all enormous, ho ho ho, ha ha ha, dwarfing and dominating almost every boy. That's how it always starts, I thought, they go about in gangs for a few years before they eventually pair off. Gangs lasted ten days. Then she

went off with one lad, his school's star footballer, to the pictures. That too lasted ten days.

When we were thirteen, back in the dark ages, you idolised the sports stars for years, till you were at least in the sixth form and you realised the sports stars were jerks and the intellectual weeds took over. Yet she's only third year. Last week she went with a boy shopping in Hampstead to buy herself a jumper. Such intimacy. I didn't do that till I was married.

She doesn't sit demurely by the phone, waiting to be asked. Oh no. She harangues boys' mothers on the phone, telling them exactly where she has to be met. She's so cool and clipped, totally beyond being humiliated. What a hussy I seem to have bred. Women's Lib has a lot to answer for. I married the school swot and it took me about three years to hold her hand. I thought Caitlin would turn out the same. Now we sit over our cocoa of an evening with my wife saying she's *your* daughter and I say, no, no, she's *your* daughter. To my horror, I have to admit she's the teenager I tried to be. Now with the modern morals and methods, I daren't think what a good time, I mean bad time, she could have. Jake, who's eleven, will probably turn out the anti-social swot.

All the other corny things have happened. You can't get on the phone. I waited six hours the other day while she and a girl friend took turns to scream down the phone at some boys and afterwards I had to pour out half a gallon of drips like a trumpet. We only see her at meal times and I have to bite my tongue to stop myself saying you treat us like a bed and breakfast place, as dads are supposed to do. One word out of place and it's the big sigh treatment followed by some heavy door slamming. She doesn't want a party this year, not unless there's boys and I lay on drink, and I said no, it's against the law until you're eighteen and you should have heard the sighs being slammed. She's not had boys at a party before, not since she was four, and that was bad enough. We still have the marks. She's scheming at present to stay in an empty house while we're in the Lakes at half term, but I've put my foot down. Gas

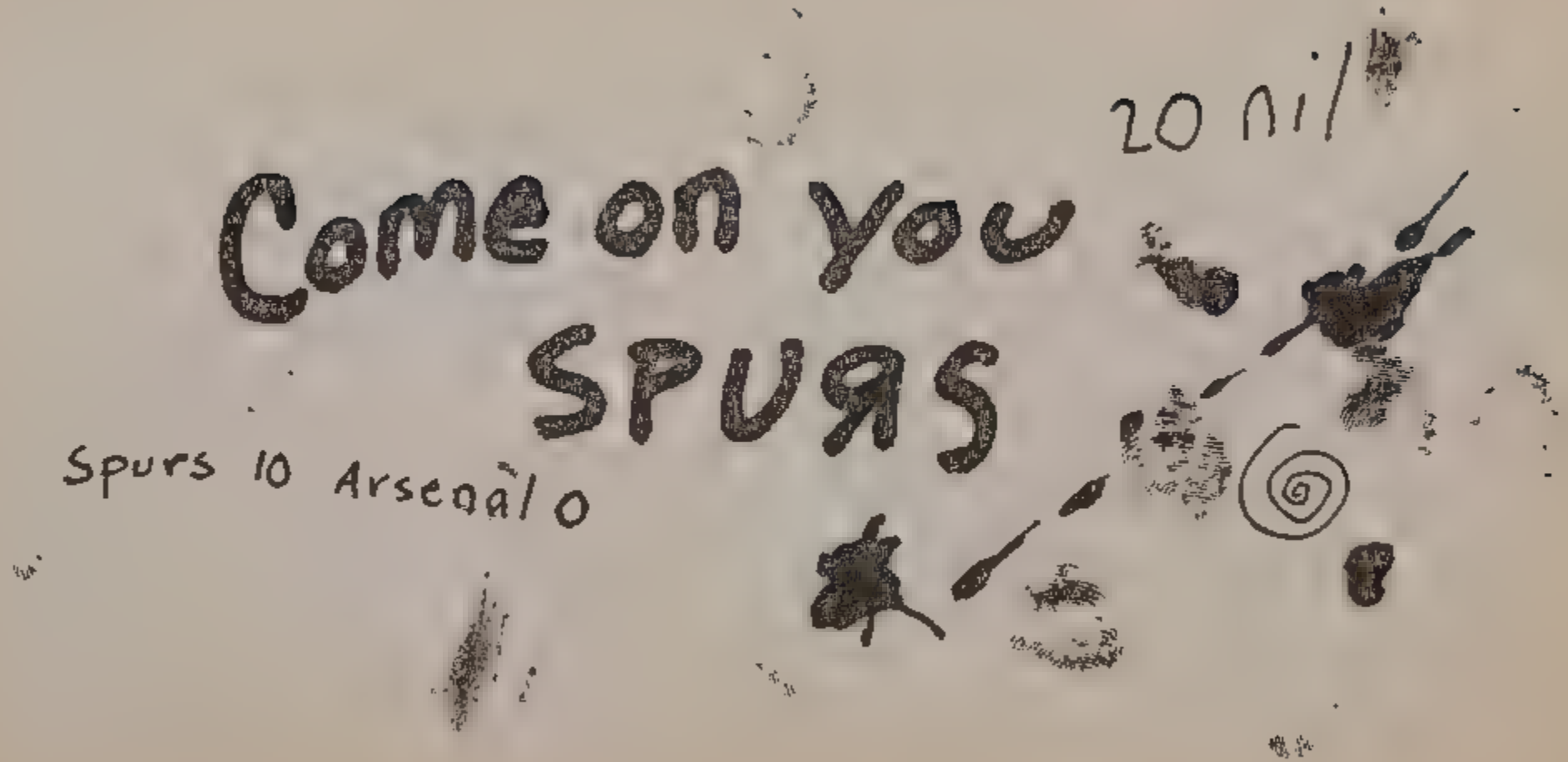
leaks, I said. For some reason my wife thinks this is terribly funny.

She has this job on Sundays, which on the face of it I approve of, having delivered papers myself at her age. (Papers? You mean get up early in the morning? You must be joking.) She trolls out about eleven, dressed for *Top of the Pops*, to help a man on a stall in Camden Lock sell badges. It's a big status thing in her class, actually being paid to hang around Camden Lock. Everyone else just hangs around. It's this arty crafty junk-stall place, jammed with arty crafty people. What about this man, I said, the bloke who pays you? Oh, he's really old, but he's very nice. He's half Russian. We discussed it for days, me and the wife. You go and see him. No, you go. So I hung around one morning, casual like, in my lumber jacket and Kickers, festooned with badges, trying hard not to look like a closet. This old man turned out to be twenty-seven and he thought I was a right joke and treated me like I was her grandad. But he did seem nice.

The thing is, it's all nice. She's so happy and so enjoying herself and I don't want to give the impression we're unhappy either. We've had no real rows. It's all so terribly normal and ordinary for her age. Her school work hasn't been neglected. I'm just jealous, I suppose, that I didn't have such fun and liberty when I was her age. At any age, come to that. A council estate in Carlisle in the Fifties wasn't exactly Soho. She's of a different class, a different age, a different society.

My dad knew what it was like to be me because society hardly changed in those days, but I've no idea what it's like to be Caitlin. It's natural she should want us kept out of her life, but should I worry when we're so excluded that we don't know where she is for six hours? I feel I should work out a plan now, well before anything really happens, getting ready for what everyone warns me lies ahead. I don't know nuffink yet, so parents of fifteen-year-old girls tell me, saying they've not seen their daughter for six *nights*, never mind six hours. I feel I must draw lines, make rules, if only for her to break, even though

I'm not quite sure what the game is. Do I say she must always be home at ten o'clock? Do I say she must always tell us who she is with and where? Or do we just smile, lay out the meals, accept any crumbs, and say nothing. Any advice gratefully received. Yours, Worried Brown Eyes.


Come on you
SPURS
20 nil
Spurs 10 Arsenal 0

Teenage Jake

When Jake was born, one of my first thoughts was oh good, someone to go to football matches with. In every town there are middle-class, middle-age dads going on and on in their terribly manly ways about how they and their sons just live for Saturday and the footer match and of course they always stand though actually we missed last week, fact haven't been this season. I like to think my response was genuine.

I'd lived for football as a kid and one of the regrets of my teenage years was not that we lived in Carlisle, where not many all-time greats greated, but that my dad became an invalid and unable to take me to matches. It was obviously a regret to him as well. He once played, when in the RAF, for Hearts, the Edinburgh club. Boast boast.

I first took Jake to Spurs when he was six and I said never again. He was bored stiff, fidgeted all the time, wanted the lav or drinks every five minutes and thought that every corner was a goal. I took him the next week, and said never again again. He soon got all the gear, of course, like primary school kids everywhere, though in our area mums preferred Arsenal to Spurs as white shirts are a load of trouble and get filthy in minutes. I should have spotted the first signs. When boring old Arsenal won the double, and every half-witted, fashion-following kid suddenly sported their shirts, Jake was still sleeping in his Spurs top. Even in the Second Division, he never wavered, though by this time all his contemporaries were following Liverpool which pleased the mums as they were still washing red.

His school work has always been unbelievably scruffy, finger marks and smudges everywhere. He doesn't just read

books—he attacks them, grinding back the spines so they break instantly, punching them in the face, kicking hell out of their insides. It's a one-sided fight. Jake always wins. You can tell he's read a book by the debris. Wordsworth was much the same, about books I mean. He upset Thomas De Quincey for ever by giving him back a virgin copy of a book with jam stains on every page. He'd sliced open the uncut pages while having his tea. No wonder De Q was so horrid about him in his *Recollections of the Lake Poets*. Anyway, Wordsworth was neat enough when it came to things he cared about, and so, it transpired, was Jake. We discovered in his bedroom a beautifully arranged pile of every Spurs programme I'd every bought him, in pristine condition, and even more amazing, the most incredibly detailed charts about Spurs' season so far, with graphs and lists on every player. There wasn't a smudge anywhere.

It's all your fault, she said. Why couldn't you have channelled his energies into Latin, just look at that exercise book, or Physics, only twenty per cent yet again. You're making one discipline more important than another, I said smugly. There is no intrinsic advantage in learning Latin verbs as opposed to learning Spurs' pre-war Cup runs. It's one of the mythologies of traditional education, along with the idea of team games being good for the character. Well, when you have a Dip. Ed. you've got to use it some time. Rubbish, she said. They do Latin at O-level not football results, thank God. Stick around, I said. By the time he's eighteen, they'll be giving Ph.D.'s on Tommy Doc and his middle QPR period.

When we came back from our holiday in Portugal last year, we arrived at Heathrow late in the evening and Jake immediately started grubbing in the debris under some chair and found a torn copy of the *Sunday Express* . . . Liverpool 7, Spurs 0. I thought he was going to have a heart attack. The awful groans and the looks of absolute agony all the way home. Jokes were impossible. He simply couldn't take it.

The early part of this season has been terrible. Spurs are playing badly and I have to handle him with such care all the way back from matches. He screams and swears when

we tune into *Sports Report* and the reporter says Middlesborough deserved to win 3-1. He's still convinced all those seven Liverpool goals were lucky, when he hadn't even been there, so anyone who dares to report a match he *has* seen and doesn't agree that we was robbed, is a —— stupid —— and he'll never buy their paper again or listen to their report. And he never does.

I happened to say, one Wednesday evening, how about going to Arsenal as I see they're at home. Watch Arsenal? You must be —— joking! Go in disguise, I said, so any school friends won't see you. That was typical of me, making a cheap joke. The point was he would *never* want to see such a load of ——, whether he was spotted there or not. I promised him drinks and goodies at half-time, and I also said I would stand. I prefer sitting down any time, which I always do at Spurs, and, as I'm paying and driving him there and back, he always unwillingly agrees. In his code, only phonies sit. Real supporters stand. I eventually got him to go with me by saying I wanted to see Arsenal *lose*. That surely would be a pleasure . . . Arsenal beat Leeds 7-0. He's never going to Highbury ever again.

I've been tarred since then as disloyal. He's brought my own liking for Spurs into serious doubt. I secretly think they've deserved to lose every game I've seen them lose, though I can't say so, not out loud. I'm beginning to think I want to see a good, skilful, exciting game played, regardless of the teams. Such abstract discussions are pointless. He's too busy kicking the furniture, banging the doors, doing his Just William scowl. I fear for his wife in years to come and begin to wonder if I've bred a monster. Because I have equivocal thoughts, murmur heretical observations, follow disloyal actions, I'm now branded as a —— traitor. I'm not fit to touch the hem of Glen Hoddle's jock-strap. Glen can be a luxury, so I think, a nice player, but not much good when the going's hard, though the merest mention of such an opinion leads to more door slamming.

I've had to tell him the bad news that I probably won't be able to take him to the Forest home game. I'm working on it, but I rashly promised the rest of the family we'd have

a day out in the country, probably at my sister's in Leighton Buzzard. I got caught, agreeing without looking up the fixture list. You neglect the rest of the family at weekends anyway, my wife says, with boring old football all the time, so it's about time you thought of us. Jake has taken it like a man. He's decided he'll go on his own. Right across north London, on endless buses and complicated connections, then that huge walk up Tottenham High Road with all the Forest hooligans looking for little lads of thirteen wearing Spurs scarves. I'm still going, he says. I'm a true supporter. He's never been on his own before. Most lads of his age are hopeless at going places anyway, though when Caitlin was his age she'd practically been in orbit, but then London teenage girls are rather advanced. Last night as I went into his bedroom—well, I have a last look at them all, even now, to make sure they're still alive, and at home—he'd fallen asleep with the light on. Over his face, half in his open mouth as he snored away, was the London bus map.

If he does get thumped, then of course it will all be my fault, having started him on this stupid football fanaticism. If he doesn't get thumped, and manages it all safely, then I know what will happen. He has hardly liked going with me all season as it is, as I moan on about having to drive all the way to places like Crystal Palace, and I often decide not to go at all if the weather's bad. If he manages it, it will be the end of an era. He won't have to come with me anymore, nor will he want to, not now that I've been revealed as just another middle-class dad . . .

Meanwhile, Flora

If it's Monday it's the Sobell Centre. Flora goes there every week for her gym class, along with twenty or so other six-year-olds. I also take Sarah and Jessie from our local streets which in theory means I should only be ferrying them every third week but you know what it's like, working from home, hanging about, so I seem to spend half my life dashing to the Sobell. It's a huge sports centre in Islington and getting there after school is easy, but coming back is murder, throwing them in the back of the car, counting the seconds, cutting illegally down back alleys, desperate to beat the rush hour.

I always stay while they have their hour's gym, though when the other two mums do their turn, they usually come home in between. Well, what else have I got to do? I'm actually too mean with the petrol to do a double journey. I also like wandering down the Seven Sisters Road while I'm putting in the hour. It's probably the ugliest, noisiest, dirtiest street in north London, but I know a fruit shop where you can get nine lemons for 25p. I admit they're rather small and usually soggy and my wife says she won't use them, but it thrills me every week to bring them home. Do you know how much lemons are in normal shops? Well then.

It's a terribly good gym class, and it's terribly good for them, and my wife is terribly pleased that Flora goes every week. I tried to get another little girl in last week and there were 170 little girls' names on the waiting list. I saw it with my own eyes. You get a very nice class of mum at the Sobell. You'd expect that, of course. It takes the middle-class mums to suss out what an area has to offer, and get little Emma

and Lucie on the list before anyone else has cottoned on. So that's Monday.

I think I'm free on Tuesdays, sorry I mean Flora's free, though there's a terribly good pottery class somewhere in Hampstead. The ballet class is on Wednesdays, but that's within walking distance. Thursday there's a standing swap. Sunday morning it's swimming. Thank God she's too young for the Brownies. That will start in the New Year.

As my wife can't drive, I've now had ten years of these arrangements, getting kids back and forward across the planet. The older two gave up their numerous activities just as Flora started hers, and in these ten years I don't think there's been a spare week in which I haven't had a hall or someone's home I've had to deliver to or collect from. I'm not very good at taking in arrangements and I'm constantly finding myself in the middle of some strange neighbourhood, unable to remember where I'm going or why or when. I've often dumped them in empty halls, and driven away, leaving them for a class which doesn't start for another week, or walked up and down some strange street with one of their little friends who is playing silly buggers and refuses to tell me which house she lives in. I go mad if a parent doesn't turn up on the dot to collect from our house, and then hangs around for drinkies, but I'm usually late myself, and I'm always looking for an excuse to get a foot in the door and have a look round their terribly clever kitchen.

We try to restrict their activities to a maximum of two a week, but there are some parents who are in transit every day, round the clock, especially if they're driving kids to school as well. These are the ones who cause all the accidents, driving their cars blind, trying to stop Tom and Ben fighting in the back or Sophie and Louise from moaning that they're bored with ballet. No you're not, darlings, you love it. 'Sboring. The teacher was just saying how well you're doing. No, I'm not. 'Sboring.

It is very annoying if they want to pack it in after only a few weeks, especially if you've begged and pleaded and lied to get them accepted. You've also boasted to other parents who only have two classes lined up that yes, Flora

simply adores fencing/drama/cookery/tap dancing, course we were very lucky to get her in. The worst is when they pack it in when you've just got all the gear. Getting all the gear is often the prime attraction of any activity. They can't do ballet in vest and knickers, even for just the first lesson to see if they like it, but have to have real ballet shoes, leotards, leg warmers and cross-over cardigans. We have a green shirt lying around somewhere which Jake got when he was in the Woodcraft Folk. I think he thought it was going to be the Hitler Youth Movement at least, as he was very keen on iron discipline at the time, but he left after half an hour when all they did was sit in a circle and think about trees.

It's always the weediest kids who join the clubs with the most impressive gear. I took Jake along once to a Judo class with his friend Orlando who had so much junk it almost needed a trailer to get him to the hall. I helped Orlando get ready for the judo lesson, while Jake worried whether he should join, and it was bad enough getting his ordinary clothes off. He was only two foot high but had this enormous six-inch-broad buckled belt round his non-existent hips. His mother, who was very trendy, wanted him built up strong so that he could knock bullies down with one finger. So far, he still hadn't got enough strength to take his own trousers off. Luckily, Jake decided he would join the Cubs instead.

The only club I was ever in as a boy was the Scouts. I can still smell the mixture of dust and adolescent sweat in that grey church hall. The camps were terrifying. Bigger boys tried to do unmentionable things to you in the back of the tent in the middle of the night and I was always racked with asthma with sleeping in damp clothes. Today, there are so many different clubs for children—catering for every predilection, I shouldn't wonder.

We've just started a new class for Flora, piano lessons on Friday after school. It's the end of the week, so it won't make her too tired for school. No one ever thinks about how tired I might become. But the big advantage is that the teacher, Fred, lives just opposite. I agreed at once. What

a dawdle. No more driving across London or hanging about. The first surprise was that on his door, in a little note saying come straight upstairs, he'd signed himself Frederic. For years I've called him Fred, but I suppose Chopin's neighbours were equally familiar. The next surprise was that I have to stay with her, throughout the whole of the lesson. My wife had muttered something about him being a Suzuki teacher and I thought that meant he sucked tangerines while he played. What it means, amongst other things, is that a parent can learn with the child. My wife, being a tone deaf, non-driver, has all the luck.

Flora's had four lessons now, and has started playing with two hands, chords and all, so my fury has softened rather. The parent doesn't actually play, just watches so that you can help them at home, doing the practising with them. I'm a bit behind with my practising and, if I hear 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star' once again I'll scream. I'm not just learning the piano, but the French, German, Spanish and Japanese for the dreaded 'Twinkle'. I had to trail down to Soho to buy the book and I was furious at first to find it was all in foreign languages, with English being only a minor part. I know the Japs have taken over the motor-car trade but who'd have thunk they would also take over the lives of little men in back rooms giving piano lessons. I can't actually help her much with her practising. She thinks I'm useless and ignores everything I tell her, slamming the lid one day so hard that my fingers got caught and I couldn't type for two days. One can't teach one's own children anything, doesn't one find?

All these mums who are trailing their kids round these endless lessons are hoping somehow to keep them occupied. They're desperate for them to learn something, anything, knowing that in this permissive, indulgent age, parents aren't able to teach their own kids, not if it involves discipline. I'm only hoping this fellow Suzuki doesn't get on to gym and ballet next. I refuse to do cartwheels with six-year-olds or wear black leotards. I dunno. Being a caring father is so terribly tiring.

On the Record

When Caitlin was a very little girl we used to measure her every month against the wall, marking her height with a pencil, even when she couldn't stand and had to be hung there like washing. We were so proud of every inch she put on and we would ooh and aah and ring the grandparents and they would aah and ooh. Then we would go over the figures in our next letter, often managing to drag out the details for at least a page.

Every family is a museum. That's one of the things Marshall McLuhan never said, though it sounds like him. Every family is unique and is the same. I think T.S. Eliot said that, or something like it. Because every family is different, and is identical, every family should have its own archivist to keep tabs on all the events, the facts and figures, past and present. In our family, I'm the Keeper.

Then we re-decorated. At a stroke, Caitlin's monthly heights were obliterated. The world will never know what an amazing example of the human race she was between the ages of nought and 24 months. In January 1966, I decided henceforth to do posterity a good turn and not rely on pencil marks on the wall to survive the holocaust but commit everything to paper, just as Gutenberg said we should. I also borrowed a leaf from Mr Xerox and ran off copies for all the grandparents.

Did we have Xerox in 1966 or is my memory playing tricks? Excuse me while I look in the files. Hmm. I sit corrected. I used carbon paper from 1966 to 1971, but from then onwards I used a duplicating machine. You see. If I hadn't kept these records, I wouldn't have these records, would I.

As well as recording all the family's heights, I also do the weights and occasionally a few graphs, to show the spurts, and the plateaux, so we can compare one against the other. Jake has for years been consistently behind Caitlin in his height for his age, but this year, aged fourteen, he has put on an enormous increase. He's shot up by 4½ inches in one year. It's a world record, for our house.

At the same time, Caitlin has flattened out. No, I haven't been hitting her. We noticed last year she had only increased by half an inch, having for the previous nine years put on an average of two inches. This year, she has put on nothing. At the age of sixteen, her height race is over. She's retired at 5ft 9ins, undisputed champion, for our house.

The strange thing is, she *looks* taller than me. On the records, and I'm in charge of them so there's no fiddling, apart from my fiddles, I'm also 5ft 9ins. Yet everyone swears she's now bigger than me. I don't allow swearing in our house, so it must be wrong.

It must have been my second operation. Two years running I've had a cartilage operation and two years running I appear to have lost a quarter of an inch in height. I don't count that. House rules. I'm determined to stay at 5ft 9ins for ever, whatever the tape measure says. So that's final.

Family records are like the truth. There's no such thing. Just as there's no such thing as The News. We record what we feel like recording, or all that we happen to be able to record, or all that someone will let us record. Instead of here is the Nine O'clock News, they should say It's Nine O'Clock and Here is Some News, at Least we Think it's New, Anyway, it's all We've Managed to Get Together Since We Last Spoke to You. It would make a great title.

Because facts can not be trusted, for the simple reason that we can never know *all* the facts, I have also taken it upon myself to record the thoughts and impressions in our family every January 1 since 1966. It was rather haphazard in those early years, but now I do it under separate headings.

There's the Highlights of the year, things at that moment which stand out in our minds about the year just finished. There's Predictions for the coming year. In this section, we

never allow bad predictions. That's another house rule. We stick to things like who might have babies, when and what sex. Who will be their best friends next year. It's not just about members of the family and close friends, but the world at large. We predict what the Royal Family will do, and Prince Charles has got married every year since 1969, or who will win the World Cup or the General Election. I told you this was invaluable material. I should really send copies to the BM.

The records for the early years are now all yellow with age. My writing was so big in those days. It's got smaller, just like me. Who said that. I have certainly not got smaller and I have figures here to prove it.

I see that in 1966 I predicted that Caitlin would have a sister with blue eyes and blonde hair. That turned out to be Jake. I predicted the car would be stolen twice. I have to concentrate hard to remember that I had a Mini in those days, which was always being stolen. I said that the roof would leak once again. Looking through the records, I said that every year till 1975, getting it right each time, till we got a new roof. One of my best predictions was in 1976 when I said that Carlisle United would get into the First Division. I'm afraid this year I've tipped them for the Fourth, though that might be classed as a bad prediction and not allowable.

On January 1st each year we seal up the predictions and put them in a safe place, usually so safe I can never ever find them. A year later, I ceremonially open them on New Year's Eve. By that time, I have forgotten almost everything I wrote. In fact we often find it hard to remember some of the names of people because they have moved out of our lives, or out of the area. If they only knew I have them stashed away for ever.

The Highlights of one year often seem unbelievable when read the next year. I see for 1980 I have said that one of the year's events was Flora and my wife both having their ears pierced. Surely we did more exciting things than that in 1980. But, in our little family, that was one of the happenings that came into our little heads, as we sat down and reminisced about the year just finished.

The most interesting section is usually Present Concerns. These are all the things in our heads each New Year's Eve, the topics we are currently grinding on about, the little things bugging us, the endlessly discussed subjects we never seem to resolve. Should I go and see a proper physiotherapist about my knee as it's sore again or should I wait? Every January for three years it's been a Present Concern. I can't bear to think about it.

Should we open up the fireplace in the sitting-room? This is a new subject, but it should run and run. We blocked it up in 1963, as we blocked up every fireplace when we moved in, as everyone did, back in 1963. But now so many people have got lovely open log fires and we could easily have one, if we hacked back the brick, or is it a steel plate, and will we need a chimney-sweep, but where do you get chimney-sweeps today, and then we'll have to buy a grate and a fender but who sells logs round here. With a bit of luck, she'll have forgotten all about it by the spring. Then next winter, the same topic will come round again.

What about the kitchen lights? Oh God, that's become another hardy annual. We have these spot-lights on a track, see. Which SHE HATES. She had them put in. Not me. Now I have to organise someone to take them out, which will mean ripping up the pine ceiling. She's not quite sure what she wants in their place. But SHE HATES them. Well, I did get the roof mended in the end, seven years after it first started leaking.

We do have a larf, as we look back each year at the things we once worried about. Like old photographs, they bring back so many memories you've forgotten you had. I also collect old photographs. I don't actually do much with them, but I have them all, somewhere. And piles of drawings and poems which all of them did when they were little. And I've got their school reports, in a drawer marked school reports, waiting for the day one of them is Prime Minister. And my ciné films. They're a legend in the family.

I often stand beside Flora, when she's at her table, and grab her scribbles, fresh from the felt pen, and have them framed and on the wall before they're dry. I'm continually

giving them diaries, urging them to start keeping their own records. Jake did do one last year, just to please me, and faithfully recorded every meal. Every day, he listed the food he consumed. For a whole year. Gold dust.

There is a danger that I am so busy recording the present while it is happening that I haven't got time to live it. I do try to limit myself. I only reminisce about things that happened yesterday, not today. I wait for tomorrow to do that.

They think I'm potty, but they'll be grateful, they'll see. I wasn't interested as a child in who I was or where I'd come from. Now, I'm furious that my mother never kept my school reports or clinic cards. Was it true I wrote to Captain W.E. Johns and got a hand-written reply from him? If she'd kept it, I would have proof, wouldn't I, instead of just making idol boasts all these years.

In my wife's family, they burn everything at once. No letter is kept. She is much the same. Is it deep insecurity or just a squirrel mentality that makes me hoard every scrap? I'll be forced to retreat into a corner as soon as the archives grow bigger, leaving me no room to live and create more archive material.

I have had a notice up on the house notice-board, situation vacant, Assistant Keeper wanted, but I didn't get one reply. The notice is now in the filing cabinet.

Party Politics

We were terribly pleased when Flora was born. Not just because she was a surprise, which she was. Not just because she arrived safely and soundly, which she did. Not just because she was a girl, which she still is. We'd had enough sleepless nights with her baby brother Jake and didn't want another boy baby. No, the main reason why we were so thrilled when she entered the world on October 31, 1972 was because she had entered the world on October 31, 1972.

My wife, whom I'd chosen to be the one to give birth, as it was more than her turn, let out an extra scream for joy. Hallowe'en! The Irish nurse said no no, it's not a boy, but a little girl. She thought she'd said Hello, Ian. When we'd got that cleared up, and everything else, she lay back like a contented cow, one of those who used to get a mention on every tin of condensed milk, and smiled happily, thinking how clever she'd been in solving the problem of Flora's birthday party from now and for ever more, amen. No no, not twin boys, just a little wee girl.

We've just had Flora's eighth birthday party. Once again, the house has been full of witches and turnip lanterns and apples hanging from the ceiling and broomsticks in every corner and it's going to take us almost the next year to clear up, by which time it'll all have to happen again. It's like putting on *The Romans in Britain* every year, just for one performance. I didn't notice Mrs Whitehouse this time, and there was a lot of rude words and bare flesh. Perhaps she'll make it next year.

I don't know why you go to such trouble, which is what I say after every children's party. She just loves organising

them. It's ridiculous, the amount of work and the expense, all for a load of kids. Next year we'll hire a conjuror. I just say that to annoy. You couldn't hold your head up in the neighbourhood if you had *paid* entertainment. Certainly not. What kind of caring parents would want to rent film shows or hire donkeys or bring in comedians or even worser, spend money and take them all out to a restaurant and then to a show. You might as well not have children, if you're going to take the easy way out. Tut tut. You'll be suggesting printed invitations next.

Our invitations are always works of art done by contented children, and they only take 51 weeks to create. That spontaneous childlike quality takes time to capture. It's educational, see, which is how my wife always replies, after she's pointed out that the expense is minimal. It's simply a matter of imagination, organisation and cunning.

The large black plastic cut-outs of witches, which cover every downstairs window, and will be there for months as they're hell to unstick, are on their fifth year now and were made from those plastic rubbish bags, 10p each, or ten for 90p. That's one of the many things about always having a Hallowe'en birthday party. You can re-use almost everything.

I wasn't quick enough this year. We bought a large load of paper napkins with witches on, which came from Party Mad but I'm not allowed to know the price. They'll last for ever, she said, eating the bill. I hovered round the tea table, grabbing little arms every time some dum-dum eight-year-old attempted to wipe crumbs from her mouth. 'Just for show,' I said. 'And if you want to blow your nose, use your dress.'

Most of them are now in the bin and I've only saved three, and they're rather soggy, but I've managed to wash the witch paper plates and untie every witch balloon. It's amazing how many items you can get with witches or other Hallowe'en symbols on them. All it costs is money. Sorry, it just slipped out. How many amazing things you can *make*.

We didn't get many turnips this year, as they were so expensive. Last year we bought sixteen and carved out one

lantern for each child, and the smell and debris lingered on till well past Christmas. I think somebody must have cornered the market in turnips this year but, surprisingly, pumpkins were very cheap. (You are making notes. I'll be asking questions afterwards.) We got a huge seven pound pumpkin for only £1.16. Every year so far a pumpkin of that sized has been about £5. Well, fancy that.

On the same hand, Caitlin and Jake's birthdays provided endless challenges, having to think up a new theme every year. They're finished now, thank goodness. God, another mistake. I mean such a shame we no longer give jolly children's parties for dear little Caitlin and dear little Jake. One day when they awoke the good fairy had been kissing the ugly duckling while the Prince lay sleeping and lo and behold, come the morn, overnight they had turned into teenagers and the world was never the same again. We've got cine films, though.

That's the one when Jake was seven and we organised a football game for him and his twenty little friends. We'd planned to have half-time, when oranges and drinks would be brought on but the fighting was so intense that we had to have quarter time, then eighth time, then sixteenth time, slicing the game thinner and thinner in an effort to calm everything down. At full time, which I blew hours early, my wife rushed into the house to grab Dr Spock and find out if seven-year-old boys could have heart attacks.

The next year we had a great wheeze. The party began out in the garden, which Jake's parties always did, before proceeding to the Royal Free. His birthday is May 24 and it was always hot and sunny, in those far-off days before the War. The first game was called Houdini. We split the boys into two teams, and it was pure chance that all the thugs were in the same team and all the drips in another and even more of a coincidence that the game began with the thug team being tied up, very very very securely with ropes, while the drips had to watch carefully and make sure no one cheated while trying to escape. That put in almost half the party.

The year after we had a Robin Hood party and turned

the climbing-frame into a castle. It looked incredible. You can see the cine, if you promise not to show yours. It only took ten rolls of lining paper, which is still the cheapest paper on the market, and Jake himself helped to paint the battlements. The drips had cardboard swords and had to attack the thugs who had to stay in the castle. In the end, they all joined forces to tear down the castle between them. What a denouement. Dennis Potter couldn't do better.

I think we lost complete control of Jake's parties by the time he was ten. That was when we put our foot down and restricted the numbers to six. It wasn't the guests, who in the main were well behaved, but Jake himself. There was a tantrum if any other boy won a prize, had first go at a game, was first served at tea, got the biggest ice cream. We couldn't even give going home presents. Jake had to have them *all*. Well, it's my party.

Who would believe he's now turned into such a lovely teenager, so kind, so considerate. I said hasn't he turned out well, when you think what a sod he used to be. If I say it a third time, he might be nice to me.

On the other hand, Caitlin's parties got easier. I know it's all a matter of brainwashing and that they're all alike and there's no real difference between the sexes and it's all our fault, forcing them into rolls, even when they're not hungry, but we did honestly try to get Jake and his boys to sit quietly with pencils and paper and play Kim's Game or I Spy, but all they wanted was a rough-house. It's the girls who love guessing games of all sorts, and respond to being treated as if they were in school, though they also like a rough-house.

Caitlin's party themes were always indoor ones, as her birthday is March 6. Now you know them all. They'll expect presents next year. We had an Alice in Wonderland party one year, for which they all had to dress in an appropriate costume. They entered through a huge cardboard tunnel in the middle of which they had to drink from a little glass of magic water and everything from then on was back to front. They got going-away presents on arrival and ate their tea under the table. I'm exhausted, just remembering them.

We also had a Gypsy party and an Arabian Nights Party, though not in the same year. In the cine films, they look much the same, with many of the little girls in identical costumes and the living room on each occasion turned into what looks like a tent. In those days you just needed to *pretend* the theme was different. Nowadays, as Hallowe'en is always Hallowe'eń we have to work twice as hard to make it the same, but better.

I think I will get the rest of those torn paper napkins out of the waste bin. If I iron them out carefully I can say next year that they're witches' handkies. We've never had *them* before.

House Keepers

I'm sitting here worrying about Caitlin. She's just rung from a motorway service station near Doncaster to say she's at a motorway service station near Doncaster, so that's a relief. She set off with her friends at 6.30 this morning to drive to Edinburgh for half-term. Don't ask me why. I'm just the Dad round this place. She hates driving long distances by car as it makes her feel sick, so she says when I'm driving her, but oh yes, when it's with her friends.

It's now after 3 o'clock. The car must be giving trouble. By the time they get there, half-term will be over. I'll have to lie to my mother when she rings tonight. Letting a sixteen-year-old go all that way, it's ridiculous. Seventeen, mother, on March 6, remember. That counts as an O.A.P. these days. But it won't do any good. And if I mention that they're being driven by some boy, she'll go spare. I'd better stick to the weather and what colour to paint the bathroom this week.

There's only one thing more worrying than Caitlin away on one of her jaunts and that's Caitlin at home while we're away on one of our jaunts. It's one of the unsolved problems of Western civilisation, one which unites all parents everywhere: at what age can you leave them behind in the house on their own? It's OK for the jesting pilot. He never stayed for an answer but just flew off.

They start at fourteen, moaning on about how draggy it is having holidays with the family, but you can usually coerce them for another year. In the end they become a drag on the holiday for everyone else. How can you push little Flora out in the driving rain and up a frozen fell-side for a six-

hour tramp when her big sister proposes to spend the day in bed, just like she did yesterday. She *hates* long walks up hills.

So we gave up about a year ago, agreeing that Miss could stay at home in London, as long as someone was in the house with her. God, the complications and confusions and hagonies we've had trying to fill the house with someone responsible, or an adult, or anyone, just to keep an eye on her, no I don't mean that, just to keep an eye on the house. Look, it's not that we don't trust you. It's a big responsibility, having a big house to look after. And we don't trust you.

My parents never had this problem. We never had holidays, ah, what a shame, although there's a rumour in the family that I was once taken to a boarding-house in Troon when I was three, just before my two younger sisters and brother arrived, and then that was it, for ever. We stayed at home for the next hundred years. We could have done with some of us going away, just anyone, as the house always seemed so full and crowded.

When I left home for the first time at eighteen, to go away to Durham, I came home unexpectedly in the middle of term and found a stranger in my bed. I arrived back late, crawled into bed, which I'd always shared anyway with my younger brother, and there was another bloke on my side. He was called Tony, a very nice lad, from an orphanage or some sort of home. I don't want to make my mother sound mercenary, taking in lodgers the minute my bed was vacant. It was just that she was doing him a good turn. No one ever got turned away, not at our house.

We spent last year pleading with complete strangers to have a free summer holiday in our lovely London house, ringing up distant relations, friends of friends. We eventually got this Scottish couple, who turned out to be Seventh Day Adventists, and they were absolutely thrilled as they were being forced to come to London with a sick child having treatment and had nowhere to stay, until they heard we were looking for someone.

'The Lord has provided,' so they said. What they didn't

know, till they arrived, was that the Lord had also provided Caitlin. It needs a strong Christian constitution to put up with her noisy records and noisy friends.

They filled in for two weeks, and then my brother and his family came down from Carlisle for the other two weeks, which was a great success. In fact I often think Caitlin would like it as a permanent arrangement. It's her idea of happy families. We go to bed at ten o'clock each night, as you well know, and if she wakens me up on her arrival home, I go berserk, staggering around in my jamas to scream at her. I can hardly sleep anyway, wondering where she is. It's all my fault, I know. I'm not normal.

When my brother Johnny is staying here, Caitlin comes home happily at twelve o'clock without any need to creep upstairs in the dark, scared to put a light on or creak any floorboards or worry about the old ogre. At that hour, Johnny is still watching TV, like any ordinary member of the population Then when the tele goes off, the frying-pan comes on. You see, Dad, that's how ordinary families behave.

We've booked Johnny for the whole of this summer, which is lucky, and pleases everyone, as his kids love doing the London museums and sites and sights. Well, you can go off Carlisle Castle on a rainy Saturday, fascinating though it is. That still leaves Easter, when we plan to be in the Lakes, but we're working on it. Applications in triplicate please, with bank references and religion.

Can't I just have Fig and Sophe to stay? No need to get someone else in at Easter. I explain the awful complications of kicking the central heating boiler and the Miele's on the blink and the upstairs lavatory might overflow again, then what would you do, not to mention burglars. I know every teenager's ambition is to have a friend with an empty house. It was my ambition, after all, I can remember it all too well. So the answer is no. Most certainly not. You're too young. I mean it's too much of a responsibility.

All around, I talk to parents with the same problem. We've just had Poo, one of Caitlin's friends, to stay the night, doing her parents a favour while they went to Paris.

They have a housekeeper, this family, so you would think there was no problem. Turns out the housekeeper says that on no account is she being left alone in the house with Poo. She's a perfectly nice girl, very friendly, a bit untidy, not at all wild, but the housekeeper said that if she was left alone with Poo, she would resign. As they value their housekeeper more than their daughter's comfort, Poo was forced to wander like a gypsy round the houses of her friends.

Ah, that was Caitlin again. She says they've got to Scotland at last. 'It must be. I can see a big notice in the mist saying Scotch Corner.' Then she rang off, having run out of money. Scotch Corner! That's miles from Scotland. And the mist has come down. What fools they are.

I suppose it's better than hitch-hiking. When I was her age, me and her mother once spent a whole day at Scotch Corner, ending up in tears, failing to get even a lorry to stop and take us over the Pennines back to Carlisle. I used my lucky left hand as well, but it did no good. I finally hid behind a wall, so it looked as if it was just a girl on her own hitching, but that failed. What fools we were.

Now I'm a Dad, I don't allow that sort of thing, do I. Hitch-hiking is very dangerous and I don't approve of it. Little did I think one of her friends would turn out to have his own car. I don't know where they get the money from. Parents these days are so indulgent. Aren't we.

She has tried to argue that she and Jake being left on their own together would be safe enough, but I don't like the idea of that either. All the brothers and sisters I hear about who are left jointly in charge cause even more problems. You have two sets of hooligans, I mean friends, invading the house, and they all blame the other lot for wrecking the joint.

It's her general standard of housekeeping that is as worrying as anything else. No plants get watered, no floors get Hoovered, no windows get opened. If you do tell her specifically to open windows, they remain wide open, night and day, an invitation to all.

But I've agreed that at eighteen she can be in charge of the house when we're away. She'll have to learn sometime.

Or I'll have to learn not to be a fusspot and take things as they come and not get upset and imagine awful things.

Hurrah. Final phone call. She's arrived safely in Edinburgh. Well, it's actually a cottage in the wilds in Berwickshire. Yes, it's freezing and wet but we're now going to have a long walk up a hill. Such fun.

Rabbit, Rabbit

We've been very nice to Flora for a whole week now. I played cards with her all yesterday morning which seemed sinful, doing such a thing on a weekday morning while all respectable members of the human race were at school, almost as sinful as going to the pictures in the afternoon and coming out while it's still daylight. You can go to the Bad Fire for that sort of thing.

My wife even stopped shouting at her about the ice cubes. Flora has this passion for making herself stupid home-made drinks, half lemonade and half orange, topping it up with ten ice cubes. She's not really against Flora's concoctions, but the number of ice cubes is rather excessive, especially as it's winter. I don't mind. Ice is cheap enough. Let them have their fun. We never had ice cubes when I was young, etc., or a fridge, etc., unless you count the one we lived in six months of the year, etc.

The thing which bugs her most of all is that Flora will decide to start making her stupid drink *after* we've all sat down for a meal. It's one of the basic rules of civilisation as we know it, engraved on all the wall tablets in our kitchen. Everyone has to arrange their drink *before* the meal begins.

Jake is worst. He gets up, shoves his way past the back of everyone else's seat, and then starts a fight to the death at the door of the fridge, as if he's in the last reel of *Jaws*. He seems incapable of getting ice out of the ice tray. We have those clever rubber ones, easy peasy, except for Jake who ends up trying to bash their brains out, then they fly all over the kitchen like nuclear missiles and the meal becomes a screaming match.

Anyway, Flora has been allowed to get away with this heinous crime for a whole week. It's led to very quiet mealtimes. I've quite enjoyed them, in a sadistic sort of way, watching my wife close her eyes and grip the sides of the chair while Flora has stood at the fridge door and messed around with the bloody ice cubes. She's ill, see. You can't be rotten to a little girl of eight when she's poorly. Fair do's.

It started with a cold and developed into a terrible wheeze. I began to fear it might be asthma, which I had all my childhood, or bronchitis. I rang the doctor and luckily a locum was on duty so I jumped at the first appointment. We love our family GP dearly, and have been with her for over twenty years, but so does everyone else. When the normal patient, convinced he's about to die, rings up and finds the doc is away, he'll decide to put off dying for another week, till the doc returns. It's hard luck on the locums, not being trusted, but the result is a very quick appointment system.

He tapped her chest through her vest, which perplexed her, as how can you hear anything through an Aertex vest, oh, I see Hunt, he hears through the holes, and pronounced it wasn't bronchitis but a chest infection. There's a lot about, he said to her. No, no, I'm the only one in my class with these sort of vests, though Sarah might have one, and perhaps Claudia, even Chlöe.

She was five days on the first lot of antibiotics, and the wheezing got worse if anything, till she sounded like a little old man with a death rattle. I took her back and he went through the vest again, and said the chest infection is still there, we'll try another antibiotic.

The know-all in the chemist, and as know-alls go, chemists are at the top of the barrack room lawyer league, said tut tut, hum hum, once you fail on one antibiotic, you could be on them for weeks and weeks. The best thing is this vaporiser for the bedroom, you mark my barrack room words. I said we'd just stick to antibiotics. I didn't like the price.

Later that day, I went to see if she fancied Scrabble, or even Monopoly, which I hate, as it gives me a headache,

but she loves it and she is poorly. And I found her in tears.

After a lot of coaxing, I got out of her that the problem was a rabbit. I said I didn't know how to play that game. Was it like Rummy. No, a real rabbit. That's what I want more than anything else in the whole world and if you really love me you'll buy me a rabbit. Dear God, give me strength. I breathed in deeply and said what about a goldfish. They make great pets. More tears. You can't cuddle a goldfish.

It's Sarah, you see. She's got a rabbit and Flora hasn't. We've been through the whole topic of pets millions of times. She was just coming the abdabs, knowing we were being unusually kind to her as she was ill. Look, we go away to the Lakes every holiday, so who would look after them? You'll soon get bored anyway. Then who will clean out and feed and water the poor little hamster, monkey, gerbil, snake, elephant, giant panda, tarantula.

Caitlin was exactly the same at Flora's age. She was once in floods of tears for days because she wanted a dog. It was the only thing that would make life worth living. We were so horrible to her. Everyone has pets except us, it's not fair, we're so selfish. What a state she worked herself into. I reminded her of this the other day and she swore blind it had never happened.

When Caitlin got over the dog, she then got it into her head that I was going to buy her a pet mouse. She'd convinced herself I'd promised, which was a lie. She got a second-hand mouse cage from somewhere and cleaned it, painted it up, put in fresh straw and water, and every night for about six weeks slept with it beside her bed. Pathetic, isn't it. Perhaps we *were* horrible parents. She also has no memory of that.

We come from a long line of non-pet owning families and I suppose the habit becomes ingrained. That's a lie. When we lived in Dumfries for a while we did have a cat which lost one of its legs in a trap. It ended up with a stump and we used to hear it going round the house at night. Pad, pad, pad, thump.

We have, of course, our tortoise, now safely asleep for the winter, missing all the fun. Wait till he wakens up in

May and I tell him about Charles and Diana. He's the perfect pet as he takes no looking after whatsoever. I didn't even put him down for the winter. Once again, I failed to find him in October and he just disappeared. Perhaps we'll never see him again. Or he's queuing at St Paul's for the wedding.

A rabbit, now. I don't think they go on heat, whatever that disgusting phrase is they use about dogs, but I bet they're a load of trouble. Please, please, Dad, say you'll get me one, wheeze, wheeze, wheeze.

They do say that having animals does children good. Teaches them to be kind and caring and responsible for others. They can express their love openly, with no complications. Perhaps we *have* been horrible all these years, thinking only of our own comfort and convenience.

I went into Sarah's to ask them about rabbits, where you buy them, can you eat them, I mean what do they eat, and I found they'd brought their huge rabbit cage into the living room. Derek, the dad, had spent the best part of a day making this terrific cage, special wire and wood and a terribly ingenious escape door. As if a pet wasn't bad enough, you also have to build a housing estate.

Smokey, for such is this wretched rodent's name, or are rabbits something else, had been brought in from his lovely cage in the back garden as he was found to be suffering from hypothermia. Oh, such consternation and worry. It's one thing having your children ill, but having to fret about a bloody pet being poorly, who needs it.

Smokey had made a good recovery in the house, except the room now had rabbit shit where he'd been allowed to run around, but not to worry, that would soon be cleared up. I ran straight home without hearing any more, determined that we were not having rabbits. But how was I going to tell Flora.

The second dose of antibiotic finished this morning and this afternoon I took Flora across to the locum once again. I think the doctor must be on her yacht. (God, she'll have me for that. Justa joke. We all know how the National Health ill-treats and badly pays all GPs. Sorry.)

Flora's wheezing seemed just as bad to me, but this time, through a vest darkly, he pronounced the chest infection had greatly cleared. The noise didn't mean much. Just a bit of stuff in the windpipes. She can go back to school tomorrow. Hurrah. No more cards for me. No more ice cubes for Flora.

And oh, by the way, said the locum, you haven't got any pets have you. That could have been the cause of the chest infection. If I were you, I wouldn't let her stroke or play with any animals. I thought Flora was either going to burst into tears, or hit him.

So that's it all settled. It was the doctor who said it, not me. Very clever, these locums.

Teacher's Pest

Name me six of Caitlin's teachers, said my wife. We were in the car driving to Caitlin's school for the annual assessment and I was really wondering whether I should have put on an ordinary jacket, and looked like a real Dad, instead of my plastic battle-jacket which I think makes me look pretty sharp, in a Sixties sort of way, but probably makes me look like her Granddad. One doesn't want to be an embarrassment to one's children, does one.

Go on, name three of them then. I pride myself on being a caring, committed parent, clued up on their little worlds, tuned in to their educational progress, knowing about all their activities, but yes, a sports-jacket, my Marks and Spencer grey one, would have been much more suitable.

OK, I knew I'd catch you out, after all that boasting. Name *one* of her teachers, then. What, I said. What are you on about? One teacher? Chris, isn't there one called Chris? Ask me another. Easy peasy.

As he's her only male teacher, no wonder you remembered his name. And what are you wearing that stupid jacket for. You look like a jerk. You don't want to embarrass Caitlin, though God knows, after these years.

I don't think my mother ever went into any of my schools in her whole life. She knew her place. Standing outside the school gates, ready to jump to attention should one of the Gods happen to go past. Parents were not seen and not heard in those days.

Now parents have practically taken over, especially in the primary schools, hanging about the classrooms all day, getting in the way, foot in the staff-room door, oh yes,

I will have a cup of coffee, these slow readers are a right drag, I think I'll help you do Maths next week, that's if it's not my turn to do Assembly, or am I interviewing the new Head that day.

I do know all the teachers in Flora's primary school, and so I should, as both Caitlin and Jake have been that way, and left marks to prove it, and given a starter for ten I could probably name every child in Flora's class, but I am a bit hazier on their secondary schools. They still have a slight mustique, as Princess Margaret might say.

With secondary schools, you have to wait till you're invited in, though there are enough opportunities, such as Open Days, school plays, jumble sales and most important of all, the annual chance to meet each of their teachers and hear, man to man, or man to woman, or mantovani, how the little treasures are progressing.

The very first one I ever went to was when Jake was four and in nursery school and they decided to have the parents in and discuss each child's educational development, which was a bit daft, as all they did was cutting and sticking, but I heard the mother ahead of me distinctly ask the nursery teacher if Jason was Oxbridge material.

The secondary meetings are the ones that matter, especially when O-levels and A-levels are coming up, and the teachers can enjoy their little bit of power, bollocking parents for their child's bad reports, saying it just won't do, and I really think Darren would be better off doing CSE. No, no, they scream. Anything but CSE. I promise to beat his little head in every evening from now on if you'll only please, please.

We'd been to Jake's the previous week. That's a boys' school, which is what Jake happens to be, this week anyway, and it was formerly a grammar school though Jake is part of the first comprehensive intake. It's highly disciplined and rather traditional and we all queued up obediently to take our punishment like men. It's almost like a prison visit, sitting silently waiting in rows, and the teacher sticks strictly to the facts when it's your turn to

put your nose against the grille, going through the latest marks without much time for any old psychological chat.

At Caitlin's school, the system is arranged in much the same way, with the teachers at desks around the hall, and little numbers so you can find them, but there's always a party atmosphere, with much shouting and laughing and arguing and a coffee bar and cakes available. Her school is also now a comprehensive, all girls, or have I already said that, but they don't have uniform. It's known as a rather enlightened girls' school, full of enlightened girls.

'You must be joking,' the girl ahead of me was saying to the teacher. She was with her parents and the teacher in question had been saying that she really must pull herself together and work harder. The usual stuff.

'Prove it,' said the girl.

'Don't be cheeky, dear,' said the mother.

'No, no, she's quite right,' said the teacher, getting out her marks book.

There was then a good-humoured argument between the teacher and girl, though it might have been two girls arguing in the playground.

I love listening to all the discussions, which isn't hard, as they all talk so loudly, comparing each girl with her parents, searching for likenesses, remembering how they looked six years ago. I only ever see most of them on this annual visit so in a year you can see huge changes. That's when I realised that Caitlin's clothes aren't as unusually scruffy as I'd thought, or that hat as ridiculous or those plimsolls so stupid. In fact, when I looked around, I could see she was wearing a uniform.

Then you sit down, face to face, with the teacher. Hmm, that explains a lot, you can see them thinking, eyeing you over. Well, I'd never expected *him*. Now I understand.

The parent in turn is thinking: so this is the bugger who has been so horrid to my child, giving her extra homework, marking all the essays badly, the queen of the beta minus minus. Hmm, now I understand. She doesn't look like a nut-case, or is that the Latin one, or has that one left, or am I getting completely mixed up.

They were all terribly kind about Caitlin, much to my surprise, pleased with how she is working. It seems to me all she does is play, but then all I did *was* play at her age, so I do tend to moan at her a lot. As if she listens to anything I say.

One of the teachers told me all about UCCA, which is not a trade union, or a branch of Express Dairies, but is the University College of California. No it's not. Got you there. I asked her what happens if you apply to a university and it turns out to be one of those which closes before you get there. That's what I heard some Vice-Chancellor going on about on the radio. We've got a dum-dum Dad here, I could see her thinking.

Women teachers, on the whole, tend to be more interested in the personality of the child and will indulge any parent who wants to try out their theories. It's also interesting to hear their theories. Most men teachers tend to go blank when you come out with your little worries, the minor things we caring parents concern ourselves with. While a woman might recommend the Tavistock, a man might suggest cold showers.

You can often learn surprising things. The mother ahead of me at Jake's school was amazed to learn that her son hadn't been at school for three days. We're all surprised every year to be told that Flora is shy in class. It must be true, as three teachers have now said it, yet all we see at home is this raver in a boob tube and make-up prancing about like a Pan's Person.

By going into the school at least once a year, and meeting the legends, the centres of their firmament, you do at least get some sort of insight. It's often the only time some parents learn anything, as a lot of adolescents don't talk to their parents about their school life. Caitlin tells us a lot, if you catch her in the right mood when she comes in from school, and so does Jake, though you have to listen hard. Having shouted his rotten head off for the first thirteen years of his life, he's now polishing a mumble.

Talking to their teachers saves you saying, 'What did you do at school today?' which is the question you must

never ask but is by far and away the question most parents want answered.

'What did you do at school today, Dad,' said Caitlin when we came home. I mumbled, too tired to go through it all. She didn't come with us, you see. She can't stand my old plastic jacket.

Hammering Tongues

We had a terrific row at supper this evening. It used to be called tea, then high tea, then when it was two sittings it was *their* tea followed by *our* dinner, and now it's supper, *tout la famille*, just as the Advertising Standards Association says it should be. All friends together, round the camp fire, the nuclear unit. Happy families.

We seem to have had a lot of rows recently. Well, not rows, intellectual discussions, the sort which flare up when *they* try to lay down the law. After all, they're at school and know everything and we're just pensioned-off lodging-house keepers, here to make meals, clean the floor, give out the pocket money and do other menial duties.

The other evening, we, the servants, happened to say that Napoleon's mistake was marching on Russia. What fools we were, what a simplistic approach to history, how out of date can you get. Caitlin gently, but firmly, as if dealing with an idiot, explained that Napoleon's big mistake was not Russia but Spain. Apparently he messed around in Spain, buggered it all up in fact, and that was the real beginning of the end. I should have known. Sorry I spoke. Your majesty. Should I clear the dishes now or wait till you've finished your thirds of the apple tart.

I only happen to have a degree in history, a very poor one, mind you, from a provincial university but their mother got an open history scholarship to Somerville, so she should know a thing or three, shouldn't she, but of course we don't know anything. That was eons ago. When you're in the lower sixth, you do know everything, don't you. And did you say Somerville. Bloody hell. Nobody goes

there any more. An all-women's college. You must be joking.

Then there was an intellectual row about hair. I said hair was alive, otherwise how does it grow. Caitlin and Jake both said that hair is dead. Hair has no cells, so technically hair is dead, see, Dad, don't you know anything, or didn't they have cells when you were at school. No, just attics I said. That got them.

Anyway, this evening's little contretemps was an unintellectual one and concerned Flora, still aged eight. She's never been keen on meat and naturally we don't force her to eat anything she's not keen on. That's what being a parent is all about, Brian. It's a very simple game. Play the easy ball.

To make up for her lack of meat, we always give little Flora a double helping of French beans. It's like eating pound notes at the moment, eating fresh French beans, but the are delicious and worth every morsel morceau of 80p a pound. Actually, what she had this evening was a full plate of lovely French beans, gently under-cooked, as her main dish. Caitlin had apoplexy. Why should Flora have all those. If she doesn't like lamb, that's her fault. It doesn't mean to say she should have double French beans. You just spoil her.

'Oh shut up, you old witch,' said Flora.

'Take that,' said Caitlin. And hit her.

It was a horrid thing to say. Flora, why did you say that horrid thing. Mind you, in those old jumble sale clothes, she does look a bit like Worzel Gummidge, though that is a thought I keep to myself. I don't want to be thumped. On the other foot, it's not very kind for a sixteen-year-old, sorry seventeen last month, to hit her eight-year-old little sister.

We all watched Flora carefully, waiting for the floods of tears and the RSC perfomance. She paused, looked around, felt her arm where it had been soundly slapped by Caitlin, and burst out laughing. She knew she had won.

So we all laughed, ha ha, which infuriated Caitlin. She flounced out, saying it was bloody unfair. Flora was the

favourite, we let her get away with murder, just because she's only eight.

Jake also sincerely believes that Flora is the favourite. You indulge her all the time and let her do things we were never allowed to do. Why don't you tell her off for a change, or even hit her. Oh, no. You never touch little Flora.

It's all true. We were much tougher on the first two when they were young, keeping them in their place, being very strict, allowing no nonsense. Now, when Flora does something awful, we tend to laugh rather than scream at her the way we did with them. She's only little, we say. Then to ourselves we mutter, she is our last.

At eight years old, Caitlin's life revolved round the Brownies, getting house points at school, watching *Blue Peter* and keeping her room neat and tidy. Flora at eight won't even contemplate the Brownies, that's just for babies, but wants to go disco dancing or even better, down the pub. She already has her ears pierced, which Caitlin never had till she was fourteen, and uses eye-shadow. Actually, it's Jake's chalk for his snooker cues and we've told her not to and she'll get some terrible infection, but what a funny idea, look at Flora, see what she's done now.

This afternoon she went to Winchester market, which is a marvellous open-air market near Swiss Cottage, though rotten old Camden Council are about to sell it off, and spent all her pocket money on a pink velvet jump suit. The big ones were horrified at us, the so-called parents, letting her do such a stupid thing.

Yet, on the other feet, Flora eats her heart out to be Caitlin. She is insanely jealous that she is not the oldest in the family. Last Saturday evening, when the usual hordes of seven-feet-high yobs, I mean young gentlemen, called for Caitlin, and they all went out of the front door, going ya ya ya, on the way to the pub, no that can't be right, they're only seventeen, they must have been on the way to the Rechabites.

Flora stood watching them from the upstairs window and cried. Why can't she go out with boys on a Saturday night

and have fun. Why should she have to clean her teeth and go to bed at eight o'clock. The world is so unfair. She can see no hope whatsoever of ever being sixteen.

I tell her that when that time comes, Caitlin will be an old maid. All that scruffy punk stuff will be completely out of date and she and Sarah and Chlöe and Claudia and Imogen and all the other eight-year-olds round this part of the Western world will come into their very own with their very own style. Perish the thought. Flora is never interested in this thought. She wants to be sixteen *now*.

However, one of Caitlin's boyfriends, Danny, happened to see this little figure with her nose pressed against the window and took time off from going ha ha ha, ya ya ya, in the street, wakening everyone up, and blew her a kiss. Wasn't that nice. Otherwise, we would never have got her to bed.

I suppose Flora is bound to be more advanced than they were, if that's what it is. Being the youngest, she has all their examples ahead of her. She's living in a hot-house. Caitlin, when she was young, was on her own. None of us knew what lay ahead and we took each step very slowly. On the other toes, Caitlin got our undivided attention, all our energies and devotion, being our first-born. That is a thought she in turn is not interested in.

I keep telling Caitlin that the oldest always does best in the world. I'm an oldest child. Look how brill I've done. OK, ignore me. Read any psychology book and you'll see that the first-borns are the most advantaged.

I didn't think so at the time. I seemed to get lumbered all my childhood with looking after my two younger sisters and younger brother, making toast for them, boiling potatoes for them. It didn't seem much fun at the time, being the oldest.

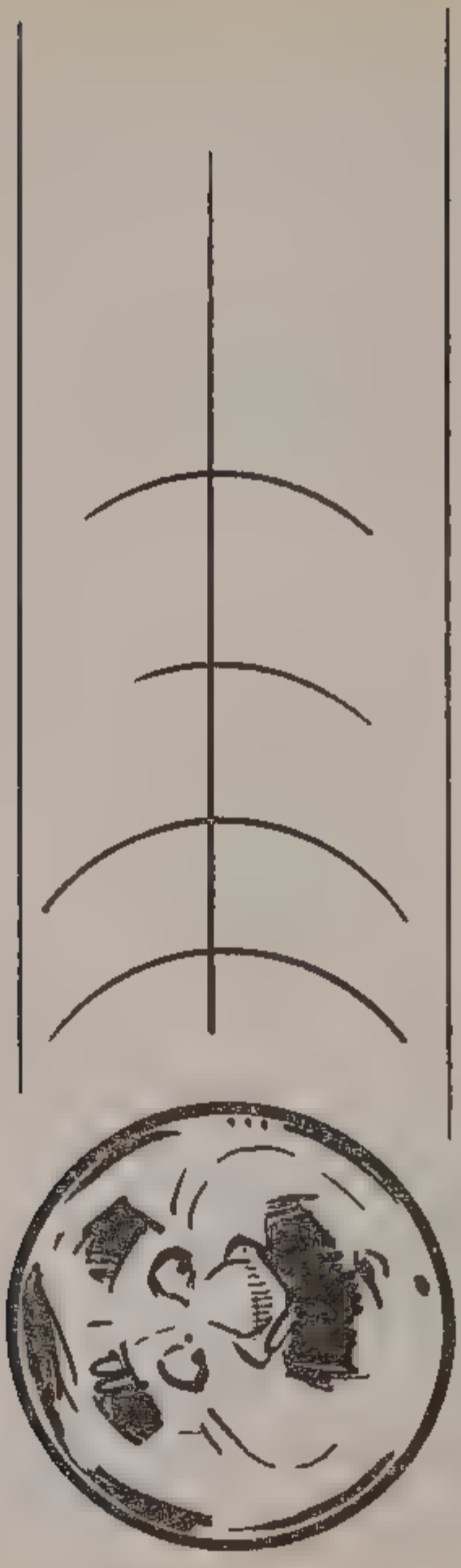
Caitlin has been spared all that. She's hardly ever had to look after Flora. On the rare occasions she babysits, and after all where do we go, Flora's usually asleep. In my humble opinion, I think she's had all the fun of being the first-born, with none of the disadvantages. But of course who asked me. She'll never believe it, not till she

herself is a parent.

Jake is a middle-born. I don't think I'd like to be a middle-born. You get bossed around by the oldest, or contemptuously ignored, and then when you get to man's estate, and become a teenager, you have to put up with the younger child being grossly indulged and having all the fun and licence you never had. At least Jake is a boy, born between two girls, which makes a difference, though try telling him. He's convinced the world is against him. They all think that.

My wife is a middle child. Her ambition in life was to be an only child. She thought that would be the most marvellous position to be in.

I'm an only parent. I only have one set of children. It's not fair.



Games People Play

They've been sunbathing in the garden all day while me and Jake have been getting progressively paler, crouching inside over the snooker table. I've always loved games with the family, though I pretend I'm doing them a huge favour, but this snooker thing has become an obsession and I'm well on the way to a misspent middle age.

We've been playing it for what seems like centuries, long before it became fashionable. Oh, it must be well over six months since I treated myself to the table, I mean bought it for Jake's birthday. I don't think we've missed a game every day since then. Now where are those scores. Jake hides them when he gets behind.

We normally play every evening after supper. Wanna-gamehunt, he says, and I grunt, playing hard to get. I don't care, he says, I'll go and finish my homework. Hold on Jake, just coming, if you insist.

We drag the table out, then we drag it away again. Almost every evening we forget that we've pinned the rest of the family in the kitchen. Snooker is very anti-social, in a normal family-sized house, as the table dominates our whole living-room. So we let the others decide where they're going, then pull the table out again.

Setemupjake. No, it's your turn. We have a row every evening before we begin and the bickering continues all the way through. We are always getting into the game when he decides he must go to the lavatory. When he gets back he plays a shot, then decides the table isn't level and gets down on the floor and starts fiddling with the legs while I throw the cue on the floor and say that's it. I'm not

playing any more.

I do of course, as I want to win. When we play beach football on our summer holidays, or when me, Jake and Flora play cards, the only object as far as I'm concerned is to win. What's the point of having children if you can't beat them at everything. Actually, Jake is ahead this month on snooker. But I have got a sore knee.

My wife hates all games, either with other adults or with the children. There are some families who seem to spend all their spare time playing games together, one big happy unit, just like the TV commercials. It makes her cringe, especially the ones doing it in public on their summer holidays. She maintains they're working on their image and it's always self-conscious and most of all it's hearty. She hates anyone who's hearty, apart from Russell, and we all know he's a lovely bloke really.

Yet strangely her hero in life is Sebastian Coe. You thought it was me, didn't you. No chance. One is never a hero to one's wife. Flora has put up Seb's photo on her noticeboard, beside her desk, which was kind. I think she even likes him more than Prince Andrew. Haven't seen his photo recently. Wonder what he's done to offend. We don't discuss such things. One must have some privacy in marriage.

She will play certain family games on occasions, if we're really stuck, such as Scrabble. She puts down the first word that comes into her little head and smiles and gets an average of three points every time and they very soon don't want to play with her any more. Who wants to play someone who doesn't care whether they win or not. I know it's terribly British, and that the taking part is supposed to be the thing, but she's not really taking part, just indulging us till she can get back to her book. She can't understand how anyone can ever want to play any sort of game when they could be reading. Or talking. They're the two occupations she prefers.

I try to explain that snooker is multi-disciplined. We do a lot of reading all through the game, rushing to the rules to stop the other cheating. And the talking never stops.

Jake has a phrase he repeats all the way through every game: 'That counts as in.'

I've gone off table tennis at the moment, which was our previous family passion. I just never seem to get any better. Sboring, I fink. But we still play chess every other day, except when I feel a headache coming on. I'm too old really for all that concentration, Jake. Your mind is young and fresh and empty. I've got all that wisdom and experience packed in, haven't I.

Flora's favourite game is Canasta. She thinks Rummy is for babies and last summer holidays she got it into her head that Canasta was pretty smart but it led to endless tears as her little eight-year-old hand couldn't hold thirteen cards at a time. I would arrange them for her and she would accuse me of looking at her cards and cheating and throw them all down and we'd have to start again. Now she copes very well, or perhaps the cards are getting smaller. I do *let* her win sometimes. Her disappointment is so utter that I have to.

Have I made them so competitive or is it inherent and is it bad or is it good? Look, let's just get on with the game and cut the chat. It's your go.

All children love games, at least up to the age of around twelve, even when they're not very good at them. Caitlin was in the netball team when she was at primary school and I was convinced she'd play for England. Then, at secondary school, I thought she would be a hockey star and we got her this brilliant pair of hockey boots, two sizes too big to allow for growth during the many sporting years ahead. I don't think she played for more than two weeks.

At one time, girls' schools were as dominated by sports as most boys' schools still are, but they seem to have given up the ghost now. I feel sorry for the PE teachers. You never see anyone queuing up to talk to them on Open Evenings. Miss Buss and Miss Beale would have a fit if they could see today's teenage girls, slouching around, pale and unhealthy, though their shiny, glowing hair might impress them.

I suppose in a few years time Caitlin will return to an

interest in outdoor sports, when she begins to equate physical activity with exercise and keeping slim and healthy and I'll say see, you should have kept those hockey boots. When you're in the sixth form of course it's not done to move if you can help it.

She can't believe that for years she came swimming with us every Sunday morning, and loved it. Even Jake won't come now. So it's just us oldies and Flora. Family games do have a natural life span. The children either give up, feeling it's beneath them to play with the family, or the parents give up, worn out and not much use you know. I now realise that after my two cartilages I'll never play football with Jake again, but I won't start that or I'll be in tears.

Snooker is of course sweeping the country. Even Caitlin has started playing. I thought at first it was just to show off to her boyfriends, or because she liked the image of the smoke-filled saloons in the late-night movies, but now I think it's because she's heard rumours that there's Big Money in snooker. She takes it very seriously. When she plays, the games proceed in silence. If you dare to make any comment, suggest a ball she should go for, or which way round to hold the cue, she storms out of the room.

Jake is currently agitating for a better table. It's one of those cheapo ones, so he says, though it cost £80 which I think is a fortune. He moans about the tin legs, hardboard sides and the chipboard top which has now warped and the balls never run straight.

I've been to look at a slate one, second-hand, as advertised in the local paper, but it was in a bloke's second floor flat and even with three people we couldn't move it one foot. We'd need a crane to get it into our living-room. And if we did, that would be it. The rest of the family would have to live permanently in the kitchen.

Smoke Less Zones

I don't know what made me turn round and look towards Caitlin's room. Call it a premonition if you will. All I know is that some sixth sense seemed to guide my eyes in the direction of her window. Call it spinning out the first paragraph if you will.

My room is at the back of the house. Slides will be passed among you later. We had this back addition built over an old coal cellar and my room is at the top, stuck out in the garden with two large windows. I feel like a ship's Captain on his bridge, surveying the scene, looking out at the au pairs, I mean admiring all the lovely gardens.

I was actually thinking about the gardens, wondering if we have a flower thief in the locality. I'd just come back from my morning walk and in the window in the next street I saw a woman sticking up the following notice. 'I hope whoever stole our flower pot is looking after the gardenia. Thank you.' The controlled middle-class fury that must have gone into that wording. I bet it makes the burglar laugh every time he sees it.

I turned towards Caitlin's window and there she was, sitting in full view, for anyone to see as she has still not mended her blinds even though I have been on at her for months to pick them up off the floor but if that's the way she wants to lead her life, then I'm certainly not running after her any more. She was sitting reading, so that was good. I like to see them working. In her hand was a cigarette. Never in my whole life have I seen any of my children smoking. I couldn't believe it.

She suddenly looked up, realising she was being watched,

as if some seventh sense, etc, and guiltily took the cigarette from her mouth. By this time I was racing up the stairs in a rage. Yes, I know you can't believe it. Mild, unassuming, friendly, permissive old me, loves all children, helps animals across the street, pats old people in their pram. This was not the image of myself which I have carefully created.

You can't get into Caitlin's room. The junk has so taken over that it blocks every surface and jams every doorway. She deliberately manoeuvres objects to keep out intruders and she herself takes ages pushing and pulling things, every time she goes in and out. I didn't even try to get in. I just banged on the door and shouted like a loony. 'That's it! That's it! You've done it now!'

I wasn't quite sure what she'd done, or what I was going to do about it, but I felt absolutely furious. It was that fleeting image, suddenly catching her smoking in such an abstracted manner, turning over the pages, as if unaware of what she was doing. It certainly didn't appear to be a novice trying out her first fag.

We've suspected for months but every time I've said there's a funny smell of smoke around here she's blamed it on her boyfriends. We don't normally allow smoking in this house, thank you. Please kindly put it out, thank you.

I even stop my sister when she asks, though I know she hates me doing so. I don't think Social Workers should smoke, do you. If I'm feeling good, I might let her stand at the back door, with it wide open, and have a few drags, as she is my sister. But that's all.

We lost the battle some time ago to stop visitors smoking inside Caitlin's room. As we've said it's her room, to keep as she likes, then we can't really interfere when she has her own guests in, can we. She doesn't mind them smoking in her room, so she says, so why should we. However, they're not allowed to smoke anywhere else in the house. And they don't.

I come from an all-smoking house. Both my parents and my two sisters and brother smoked, which drove me mad.

I suffered from asthma all my childhood, and the slightest whiff of cigarette smoke made me wheeze, so I was never even tempted to try a cigarette, and these fair lips have never been sullied. My father was an invalid, bed-ridden most of my childhood, and yet right to the end he was smoking away, despite choking and spluttering. It became one of his few pleasures in life. (And he died of multiple sclerosis, not lung cancer.)

I've always been determined that my children won't smoke, but I didn't think I would have to lay down any laws. Our self-righteous example, as non-smoking parents, would do the trick. When parents smoke there's not much you can do to stop the children.

I tell a lie. I once did put a cigarette between my lips. I was doing the Beatles biography and Ringo, when he heard I'd never had a reefer, said here's one, have a go, it's really great, you'll love it.

We got the children to bed early. Oh, this must be fourteen years ago now and Caitlin and Jake were babies then. We took the phone off the hook, locked the front door, closed the curtains and settled down to be really wicked. I'd decided I would say it was research, if we got raided, but I was very worried, thinking it's usually the beginners who get caught by the police while the regulars get away with it.

It was hard lighting up, as neither of us had ever lit a cigarette before, and inhaling was even more awkward, but at last we managed it. We lay back, waiting to feel really good, but nothing happened. Perhaps we were smoking the wrong end. Perhaps you ate them. After an hour in which nothing happened we put on *Kaleidoscope* on Radio 4 (OK, don't tell me it wasn't called that) made some hot cocoa and toasted cheese and carried on with our normal exciting evening and were in bed and asleep by ten past ten.

When I next saw Ringo I said I didn't think much of his reefers. I knew all this getting high was just a myth anyway. He said I got you there. It was just cabbage leaves. Was he lying or was it true? Perhaps we'd just failed to smoke them properly. I don't know, but we never tried

again, remaining pure and prissy for ever.

Caitlin came down to my room about half an hour later, after a lot of rustling and scuffling, and asked sweetly and politely why I'd been banging on her door. I said that was it. She was getting no money from me when she becomes twenty-one. Those savings are for non-smokers only.

It was a pretty rotten trick and rather a stupid way to react. I have these National Savings Certificates in each of their names, and when they eventually reach twenty-one, they'll get about £3,000 each. Until that moment, I'd never decided that they were for non-smokers only. It had just come into my head. So it was a bit unfair on Caitlin.

One of her girlfriends harangued me next day, saying it was horrible to cut Caitlin out of my will, just for having a smoke. The threat had obviously increased when she got to school. 'And I thought you were a liberal father,' she said cunningly. One of her boyfriends, who actually is a heavy smoker, said he thought it was a good idea. He wished he could stop it now before he gets really hooked. He's heard that when you get old, such as nineteen, then it's impossible ever to stop.

Caitlin is now seventeen so we don't have many rules these days. She *thinks* we do, but we don't. At that age, there's not much a parent can do anyway. In a year she'll be going away to college, or I hope so. I need her room for my stamp albums. Any influencing we've done is over. She's accepted it or not. At eighteen, she'll be off. The final baton change will then take place and she'll have to run the rest of the race on her own.

I think I've got that metaphor from *Reader's Digest*, or have I made it up. Anyway, there's some more mileage in it yet. You see, friends, a clumsy baton change can make you lose the whole race. (Like it? You can borrow it yourself. No charge.)

So, in these last few months of trying hard to be a responsible parent, I feel I should stick to at least some of my standards. I handled the whole smoking thing badly and was very silly, but I made my point. I now believe that she doesn't really smoke. She says it was only a passing

thing, trying it out. She can't afford it anyway and she agrees it is a health risk. So, she's now a non-smoker.

P.S. I did hear of one parent who promised his son £10,000 at twenty-one if he was a non-smoker. He made it. Then spent all the money on cigarettes. I don't believe my petal would do such a thing, do you.

Domestic Notes

It's so exhausting going away on holiday. My wife has been madly cleaning everything, as if the inspectors were coming in, not just our relations, and I've got a list of all the lists of things I now know I'll never get done before we leave.

We have so arranged it that we have friends or relations here for the whole of the time we'll be away. They're very grateful, poor things, but if they muck up anything, after all the preparations I've done, I'll go spare.

It's only when I've gone round that I've realised the house is falling to bits, kept together by the fact we know it's falling to bits and have learned to live with it. Strangers won't possibly know how to cope, as it's taken us eighteen years to get to grips with our inadequacies, so I've just spent a whole day labelling all the items, sticking on handy hints for careful users. It looks as if everything is up for sale.

I've re-written the notice on the Miele three times because even I couldn't understand my own instructions. Put simply, the hinge on the door has been broken for two years so when you let it down, the whole thing collapses on the floor, unless beforehand you stick one of the kitchen chairs underneath it. Quite easy, really. We do it without thinking.

It does mean you have to climb over all the furniture to load up the dirty dishes, as once you have the kitchen chair in position you can hardly move. I know it's ridiculous, but we can't face having the Miele service people in. Have you tried to ring them? On the other hand, if some fool just opens the door, the whole thing would collapse, then we would be forced to ring Miele, if not 999.

I'm a bit worried about my note with regard to window

cleaning, instructions for dealing with, in the event of his miraculous appearance, see over page, please note. If it fell into the wrong hand I could be sued for thousands.

Our regular window cleaner went off to Canada last year. I dunno why. How do I know? Flora has a friend whose total conversation consists of How do I know. Very catching.

There's a highly recommended window cleaner who does one or two chosen people in our street, and we're on his list. Well, his probation list. We have conditional acceptance, depending on our good behaviour, if we're kind to him, fit in with his routine, achieve good A-level results and get the fees together. Even then, he's not promising. It must be easier to get into Oxbridge.

He's been several times, but on completely different days. He just arrives, when he's got a gap, and should we be out or not ready for him or asleep, then bingo, he's off. That's us finished. It would be our own fault, of course. He's already dropped one house because they weren't in when he chanced to call. Serves them right. People really don't know how to treat window cleaners these days. All it takes is subservience.

The position is complicated by the fact that there are two cowboy window cleaners going the rounds, both tramps, who also arrive at strange times. On no account must they be let in.

I went down to the front door the other day to find this scruffy old bloke with a rag who said he was our new window cleaner.

'What's your name,' I said, having been warned by the house bulletin to be prepared.

'What name do you want,' he said, looking sly.

'No, you tell me your name first,' I said, looking slier, or is it slylier.

He said he was called Ron and I said ha ha, we're waiting for Fred and he said oh yes, Fred sent me and I said, oh no, I just made up Fred, so thank you very much, my good man. When you work from home you learn to cope with such intellectual problems.

When I'd written out these complicated window cleaner instructions and dire warnings, I realised I'd done it all before —at Easter when we were away and some American friends had the house. Dear God, has it gone on that long. On that occasion we left a £10 note to pay the real window cleaner. (His price is £8 which is for three storeys, inside and out, compared with 15 shillings in 1963 when we arrived. Let's have the facts.) My instructions got our friend Karen so confused that she went off to California with the £10 note. And she still has it.

In the living-room, the TV sound still doesn't work, but my brother Johnny knows about that, as the button's been broken for four years now. It's on permanent low, which suits us but drives everyone else furious. The brand new Junior Hoover is on the blink so I've warned campers that the bag might have to be emptied regularly and the contents disposed of. If in doubt, try the Royal Free Hospital.

Don't try to close the curtains, as you'll never get them apart again, though I am going to mend them soon. If I didn't have all these notes to write I could get so many jobs done.

Please be careful with the washing-machine. *There is nothing wrong with it.* It's an expensive German one, an AEG, because the bloke next door said English washing-machines were a load of rust. We have it on every day of our life. Such dirty people in our house. If we hear that some idiot has buggered it up, we'll probably not come home, ever again.

Oh yes, that funny wire cage behind the front door must on no account be removed. I happened to be coming down our street the other day and I saw one of Caitlin's friends going straight to our house, open the door, walk in, yet the door was closed and she hadn't got a key. Answers in a plain envelope please. She'd simply put her hand through the letter-box and opened the door from the inside. My precious Penny Reds. Anyone could have got in and stolen them.

So I've fixed up this sort of wire barricade, a temporary arrangement which we'll have for the next twenty years. The postman hates it and our letters now arrive shredded, but

it does mean no one can get their hand through.

Going upstairs, unless you want to lie down for a bit, have a rest after all these notes, don't be alarmed if the sitting-room phone appears to start bells ringing all over the house. It *does* start bells ringing all over the house. That's the answer. As for the cause, how do I know. I can't face ringing the Post Office Engineers. Not this decade anyway.

You will notice under Jake's bed three copies of *Rothman's Football Yearbooks*. They may look interesting, and Simon might want to read them, but *don't* let him. He could get killed. These books hold the bed up. Perhaps the roof as well.

The very modern, architect designed shower on the top floor is a joke shower. Yes, I know we've had it fifteen years, and for fifteen years it hasn't worked. We should have had the plumber, and the architect, either back at once or hanged. Don't tell me. I've got enough problems. It's all to do with water pressure. Look, you're getting a free house, you don't expect things to work, do you?

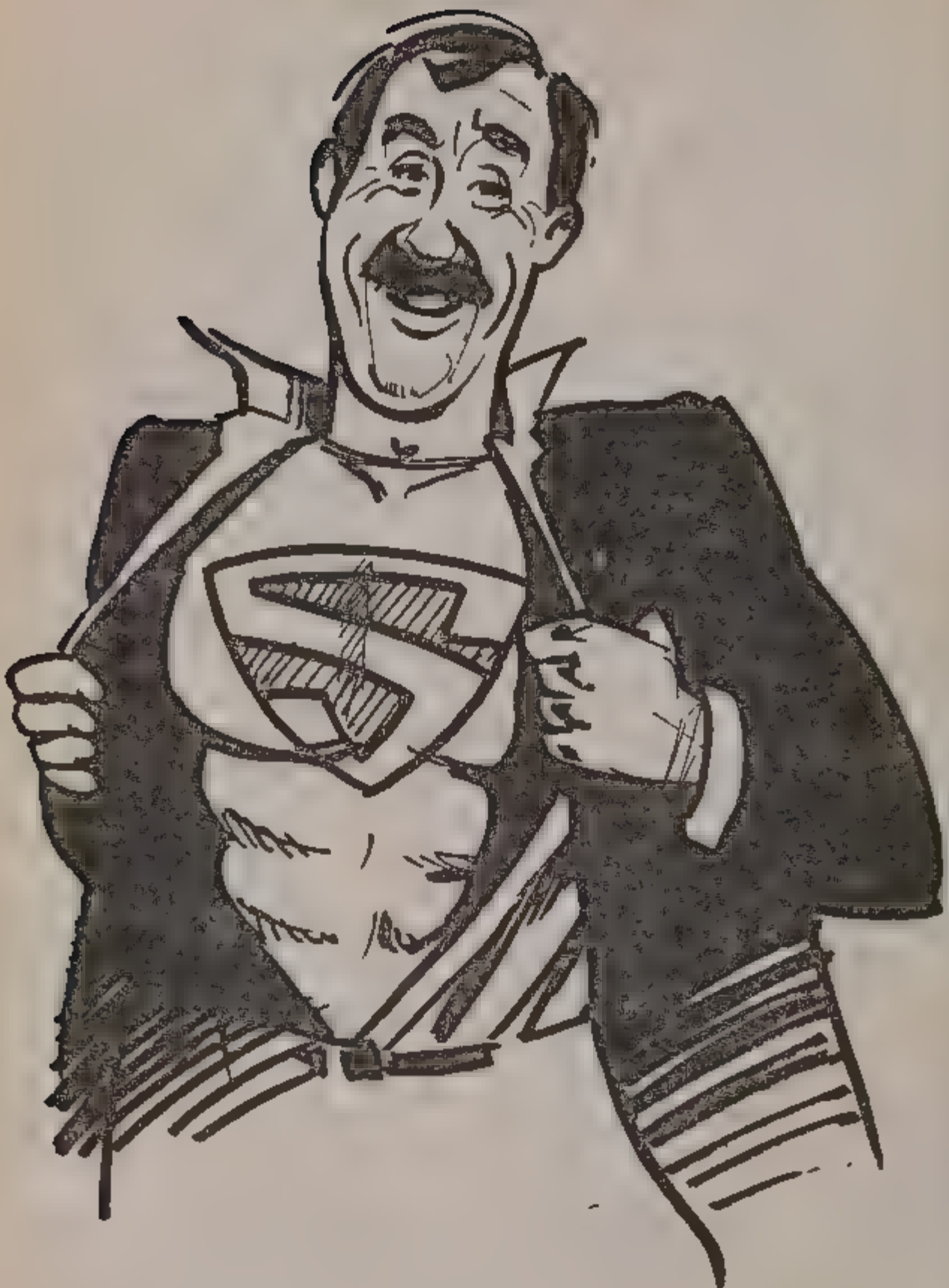
Now the plants. Something strange has happened in our little domestic life in the last year. I am no longer OC/Plants. My wife has taken over. She can write all the boring instructions. It all started when my sister Marion was in charge one week and watered them once only, on the last day, despite my instructions on exactly what to do. They were swimming down the hall when we opened the door on our return. My fault, of course. Oh yes, always blame me.

The smell of gas is the smell of gas. You are quite right. Don't ring the fire brigade. It's that stupid Parkinson Cowan. The pilot light on the grill never worked from the beginning and that's something else we should have complained about. You'll notice it first thing in the morning. Just open the windows. Pick up any dead bodies. Life goes on.

I think that's everything. If anything else goes wrong, don't ring me. You're on your own. Oh God, I had better write down the name of our good plumber, and our nice builder, and that cheap electrician. Otherwise someone might contact one of those ten thousand cards which come

through the letter-box every day. And they're just the roof menders.

We're now away on holiday for three weeks. Everyone needs a holiday. It's the only way to recover from getting ready to go away on holiday . . .



Hero Today, Gone Tomorrow

I had to pick up Flora from a friend's house the other evening. She doesn't go to this house very often but when she does it's all high jinks and over-excitement, and she won't come away and I have to stand there in the hall like a dum-dum, trying to be the father figure. I hate going for her, but when you work from home, that's the sort of job you get landed with.

I decided to walk, to give myself a bit of exercise, though knowing I was taking my life in my hands. No car! That would start it all off, with Flora in the hall stamping her little foot and me saying no car, dear, I thought the walk home would be good for you, now come along, please, don't mess daddy about.

It was a good walk. This is the time of year for urban street walks, between six and seven in the evening, with everyone coming home, the lights full on, the curtains apart, living their lives on an open stage. It was one of the first strange things I noticed, when I came to London twenty years ago. Nobody ever seemed to pull their curtains. No shame, these Southerners. In the North, we had our curtains tightly pulled from about four o'clock onwards. And that was in summer.

The smells and sounds and sights are so exotic in an inner London street. The middle classes with their Habitat pine and open-plan minds or the Greeks and the Indians arguing over the kitchen pots and pans. I often gape for hours. You could press your nose right up against the windows, and they still wouldn't mind. In the North, you're only allowed to admire the lawn. And they do have some immaculate front

lawns in Carlisle. Dare to peep at the window, even when the curtains are drawn, and they'll call the police.

So, I had a v. interesting walk, noting the different wallpapers, the new bedroom carpets, the teenagers breaking out, the living-in friend now doing all the cooking, and got to the house at the appointed time, determined to be strong and get Flora out with no arguments.

She was half-naked, jumping around to some awful Adam Antics with her little friend, but they put the record off when I arrived and Flora quickly got her clothes on and said thank you for having me. What a treasure. What a credit to her father.

She put her coat on, without being told, but left it hanging open so I said come along now Flora, button it up, it is a cold night and you have got the sniffs. She went back inside to get her school bag, and various notes and bits and pieces which she had to bring home from school, and gave them to me to carry. One likes to be useful.

As we opened the front door, her coat was still unbuttoned, so I remonstrated. Well, I quietly pointed out that I had told her to button it up. It's no fun for us, Flora, if you're off school with flu and sniffing and oh, the usual stuff one says when trying to convince the world that you're a caring parent.

'Oh shut up, you,' said Flora, turning on me. 'Just shut up. I'm *not* buttoning up, so there.' And she flounced off into the street.

I turned and tried a half smile, just to show I was not upset, not one of these hooligan fathers who lash out, but I didn't get a half smile in return.

'Isn't it awful,' I said. 'These kids today. I would never have said Shut Up to my father.'

'*Ours* never do,' said the mother, firmly closing the door.

They have older children, apart from their nine-year-old girl, and it is true they are all very well behaved. But bloody hell. How self-righteous.

On the walk home, I ignored all the open-plan widows and stripped pine graduate wives, and decided it was me at fault. By this time Flora had buttoned up her coat and said

she was sorry, and we were all friends again.

It's parents like me who are ruining the country. Go on, say it. Yes, I know, we were to blame for the Toxteth riots and those Chelsea football hooligans. Sorry, Mrs Thatcher. But for me, I'm sure there would be no unemployment and inflation would not exist. If only our generation of parents had been *authoritarian*. That would have solved everything. Probably would have won us the World Cup as well. As it is, we're all wets and softs.

I can't remember my children ever being in awe of me. Caitlin so often treats me like a half-wit. I just have to get some small point wrong in the latest UCCA saga, or ask a question she's already answered, or refer to some teacher who left decades ago, don't you ever listen, and that's my lot. No more stories for me, unless she's in a good mood and I am indulged.

I've told Jake I have actually met Steve Perryman, in the flesh, and do you want to hear about when I was at the World Cup Final at Wembley in 1966, but he hasn't been impressed. And what about the time I saw the Beatles recording every track on *Sergeant Pepper*, sitting in the Abbey Road studios with them, but does that get me any house points. Does it heckers.

I did a little chat at Jake's school not long ago, telling them how to run a school magazine, and one boy came up to Jake the next day and said it was a good chat, really interesting. 'You've been conned,' said Jake.

Until he was aged thirty, William Makepeace Thackeray thought his mother was a saint. That is a bit old to get wise to the world. It is normal for the scales eventually to fall from the eyes of children and parents to be revealed as after all having feet of clay, and other complicated clichés, but it usually happens well before adulthood.

I have done my children a great favour. There will be no shattering revelations in their lives. My feet of clay have been leaving muddy prints all over the place since they were born. They can never be disillusioned. I have never been a hero to my children.

I didn't want to be a hero, of course, I haven't got the

muscle. As a parent, I'm a seven stone weakling, but I've tried to be quick enough on my pins to avoid too much sand being thrown in my eyes. Sometimes I've got myself in a bit of a mess, but then anyone would, with clay feet and sandy eyes. Where have all these mixed metaphors come from. It's only January, and I've already used up my annual allowance. Right, that's the last one.

I wanted to be their friend. Ah. But Oh God, the long explanations that has led us into over the years. We're the Dr Spock generation, we caring parents of the Sixties. We believe in reason. He never told us that being reasonable would take up so much time. It would have been so much quicker and easier to have slapped them down and allowed no discussion.

Next time, I think I'll come back as a tough, no-nonsense parent, just to see what difference it makes, and treat them instead like dogs. I could keep Caitlin in a kennel, outside of course, then I wouldn't be awakened when she came home late. If I fed Jake on Pal he would be so much smarter, with a lovely shiny coat, and it would save a fortune on the housekeeping. And transport. I'd make him run to Spurs, not get the bus. I'd keep Flora in a basket and rent out her room to lodgers. All conversation would be in whistles, plus kicks to emphasise certain points. They'd probably love it. Consider me a real hero.

As it is, I don't know how this being reasonable system is going to work out, whether the final relationship will be any better than mine was with my parents.

I spent half my time as a child hiding things from my parents, even dopey things like chapped thighs. I wore short trousers as a boy, till I was about twenty-five, well, almost. I can hardly believe it now, as even babes in arms these days wear jeans.

Every winter the tops of my legs used to hurt like hell. I suppose it was with rushing when I went to the lavatory, and not drying myself properly. The gales coming in from the Solway Firth would head straight up my trouser legs and that was it, red raw till the spring. For some reason I thought this was terribly embarrassing, and wouldn't tell my parents.

Jake as a little boy insisted on telling us everything, showing us everything, and we would say no, no, Jake, please spare us that. We *know* what it looks like. Go and put your rotten clothes on, at once.

We haven't been as open as some parents I know, the real liberals and permissives and other rude words, who have utterly no secrets from their teenage children, who talk happily about their lovers, and then listen to the children talking about their lovers, then bring the lovers in so they can *all* talk about it. There's no need to go into further details. Let's leave that to *The Guardian*, or the cartoonists, or *The Guardian* cartoonists.

It could be that with my children things will happen in reverse. Having received so little respect from them so far, being told to Shut Up or Drop Dead, the scales will fall *over* their eyes when they do grow up. I'll suddenly be looked upon as a wonderful human being, which secretly I have been all the time anyway.

They'll hang on my words of wisdom and bow to my superior knowledge and never say anything horrid to me and be utterly respectful. I can't wait to be an Aged Pee.

Late Night Movers

I am lying in bed, wondering how much longer I can go on lying in bed listening to the noises down below. Probably all night. Oh God, I'll never sleep. We only have two teenagers, and they haven't been teenagers all that long, but it seems to me that for the last hundred years I have lain in this bed either listening to their rotten noises or *waiting* for them to come home and start making their rotten noises.

Nobody is having a party. There are no records being played. No one is shouting or screaming or crying or laughing. And it is only ten past ten. So what am I moaning about?

For a start, I should have been asleep five minutes ago. That's what we normally aim for. We hear *Kaleidoscope* and then the News headlines, and that's it, lights out, heads down, like decent, ordinary, well adjusted, completely average, run-of-the-mill adult people.

We, by the way, means me and my lady wife. She's here as well. She usually is. I know that me lying here, all bitter and twisted as I listen to the noise down below, is keeping her awake. Any minute now she'll blame me. If I just relaxed and went to sleep, then she could get to sleep. But how can I relax? There's that noise again. Ping, ping, pong, pong. Can't you bloody hear it? I dunno. What the hell is he doing downstairs?

Now I can hear furniture moving, a table being dragged across the kitchen floor. So that's what he's doing. Playing table tennis with himself in the kitchen, bouncing it off the walls. Has he no consideration? What have I done to deserve

this? How can a fifteen-year-old make so much noise on his own?

Shall I get up and bang on the floor and tell him to shut up. That will just lead to more noise. I'll really have to shout to make him hear. Then Flora will wake up. She was in bed as usual at eight o'clock. She made a slight song and dance about it tonight, maintaining she wasn't tired. 'I wish I *was* tired,' she said. 'But I'm not.' I went to tuck her in, precisely one minute after she had gone into her bedroom, and she was fast asleep. What a good girl. Why couldn't they all have stayed nine years old for ever?

The ping ponging has now stopped. He'll be walking across to the kettle, to make himself some more coffee. Yes, I can hear it being switched on. Now there's silence. Boing, boing, boing. What can it be this time? He's started singing to himself. How can he be happy when I am lying here so unhappy? It must be snooker. He's playing himself at snooker. 'That counts as in.' I can almost *hear* him winning. I wish he'd hurry up and get the black in and give me a break. Ho ho, break. Gerrit.

He must be waiting for the late night movie. What sort of strange creatures have we bred. I've never watched a late night movie in my life, or any film on TV. Of course we're the normal ones. Doesn't the whole world go to bed at ten?

Bang! Bang! God, what a fright, just when I was dozing off. No, that's not true, how can I be dozing off. It's Jake banging on our bedroom door. What the hell does he want?

'There's no toothpaste.' Jake's hoarse whisper, which he thinks is so low it won't waken us up, just in case we might be asleep, can probably be heard all over North London.

I pretend to snore. So he repeats his query. Louder this time. Why does he want to clean his teeth now?

'The toothpaste's finished,' he says again, almost in my ear-hole this time.

'Gerrout! You don't have to clean your stupid teeth. Just shurrup and gerrout.'

His mother tells him that there's some in the upstairs sink, but go up quietly so that he doesn't waken Flora. Fat chance. All the hall lights have now been switched on so that our

bedroom is suddenly like Blackpool Illuminations.

Now he's gone into the lavatory. He's like Pavlov's Dog. Cleaning his teeth means going to the lav. He's just had to pull the chain, hasn't he. No consideration at all. I'll have to lie in agony for the next half-hour now. That upstairs lav is sticking and if the ball cock doesn't cut off soon I'll have to get up and go up into the loft and I've left the ladder in the side passageway and where's the torch? I haven't seen it for months. I think I'll move into an hotel. Hurrah. The cistern has stopped flushing.

'I've got no clean socks.' Bloody hell. He's back again. 'I need them for school.'

'Go in your bare feet, you half-wit,' I say.

'Wear a pair of Hunt's,' she says. 'They're clean.'

What a really stupid thing to tell him. He's now lying on the floor in a heap, having come into our bedroom and fallen over the chest of drawers where I keep my clean socks. Perhaps this *is* the late night movie. Ciné verité. They're filming it all with hidden cameras.

At last. He has gone back downstairs again. All I can hear now is silence. That's the trouble. That sort of silence will keep me awake all night, waiting for the next noise.

Where is that Caitlin. She promised she wouldn't be late. About six o'clock this evening she said she was going round to Jane's for an hour. That was four hours ago. It seems like every night for the last two hundred years that I've been lying here, waiting for her key in the door.

Our nocturnal curves coincided for about half an hour something like five years ago when she was twelve years old. For one brief moment in time, we *all* went to bed by ten o'clock. Oh, bliss it was and to be asleep was very heaven. Now she's shot past us into the stratosphere, still going strong. Goodness knows when or where she'll land. Our metabolisms are just so different. She thinks twelve o'clock is an early night.

Several times recently, Jake has locked the front door when he's come in, not knowing Caitlin was still out. Naturally she has to ring when she gets back. More hysterics.

I now have a new system when they're both out. I leave

a special notice on the hall stairs which tells them to Tick Name When you Come In. So, whoever is last in, locks up for the night. The trouble is, I don't trust my own system. I feel it will all go wrong and I lie fretting that I'll *still* be wakened up.

Very often, I have fallen asleep, somehow, then wakened with a start, wondering what the time is and whether Caitlin is home yet. How awful if the police ring and we don't even know where she is. So I get up and check that the front door has been locked. Then I know she's in. Or do I? Has Jake locked it by mistake?

I could go up to her bedroom, and see if she's asleep, but her bedroom is such a mess, with cushions and blankets all over the floor. There might be dozens of them asleep there, none of them Caitlin.

The other night she came home in agony as a car had run over her foot. It wasn't as bad as it sounded, though bad enough. She now has boyfriends who have cars, just sixth formers from the local boys' school, where do they get the money from, how do their parents allow it. This night they were going to a party and they ran out of petrol so Caitlin got out to help push the car. Someone decided to push it the other way, and it ran over her foot. Nothing was broken. Except my sleep.

When I'm listening to house noises, which I have done for three hundred years, I can cope much better. Walls collapsing, pipes bursting, the roof falling off. I've heard all these signs for years, but I just turn over and think, well, it's an old house, you've got to expect such night-time noises. I'll investigate in the morning. The night the ceiling in Caitlin's room *did* fall down was such a surprise. Especially for Caitlin. She was in bed early for once. It was a dreadful warning to her. She knew from then on that no good could ever come from early nights.

They do try to respect our bedtime habits. They never bring people back into the house after ten o'clock, not these days. Me appearing in my pyjamas at 10.15 and slobbering at the mouth like a loony soon stopped all that.

Did I ever stay up late as a teenager? I can't really

remember, though I often used to miss the last bus and have to walk right across Carlisle from my wife's house in what *seemed* like the middle of the night. Perhaps it was only ten. All life in Carlisle stops at six o'clock.

On one famous occasion, famous in our family anyway, oh not that again, we once walked all through the night from Keswick to Carlisle, a distance of some thirty miles. We got home at seven in the morning. I was a wreck and she carried me the last few miles. A tramp scared me. Not my fault.

There goes the front door. Yes, and I can now hear it being locked. Our oldest and dearest is at last home for the night. All's right with our little bit of the world. It can't be more than eleven o'clock. I'll just give it a few more minutes. I have known Caitlin come home and have a bath, put on her pyjamas, then the phone rings, and she's out again in a flash.

That sounds like the phone being dialled. Our three phones are all on the blink. It's like a burglar alarm going off whenever anyone dials. She's probably ringing Jane, having seen her all of one minute ago. She'll be on for hours. I often come down in the morning and find the phone on the floor, the cushions in a heap with three empty tea-cups beside them and steam still coming off the receiver. If I ever find out she's been ringing abroad when my back is turned. By the left.

She and Jake will now be settling down to watch the movie. At least they watch it happily these days. Last year, they used to argue all the time. Caitlin would accuse Jake of making noises with his mouth when listening or asking silly questions about what's happening. Then he would get bad-tempered. At close of play, they would both rush up the stairs still arguing, saying it was the other's turn to switch the telly off. It was so stupid. Then I'd have to get up and go down and put it off.

Silence, real silence, at last. They must have the volume right down. How kind. They do enjoy these late night movies together. Perhaps I should get up. That would solve everything. Have I been missing something wonderful all these years? Such as midnight.

Stout Party

It's over at last, Caitlin's eighteenth birthday party. It seems to have been the only subject of conversation in this house for the last three months. Actually, it's not over yet. Somewhere outside there, in the world beyond, it's still going on.

Flora and I have just arrived home, having been present for the first two hours. When we left, one of the managers had taken over the disco microphone to warn that the party would stop if anyone started smoking. Smoking jobs, is what he said. What can this mean? Flora had no idea what he was talking about. Neither have I. I only hope they all behave themselves. Don't want it to end in tears. Not after all that preparation.

The first problem was where to hold a party. Over my dead body would it be held over my dead body. The party in our house for her fourteenth birthday was more than enough, thank you. Never again, I vowed, and the marks on the wall still haven't gone away. But being eighteen is a bit special, as they say on *Match of the Day*.

We decided to treat it as her coming of age. She's been grown up since she was thirteen, if you ask me, as if anyone asks me anything, but I agreed a proper party now would be instead of a twenty-first. Eighteen these days is the Big One, the watershed in a young person's life, after which everything is exactly the same as it ever was.

I suggested the Music Room of Burgh House in Hampstead, a really lovely room, with old panelled walls, very tasteful, where I held my famous stamp fair in the summer, the sort of place which would be perfect for the young ladies in their long dresses and the young gentlemen in their bow

ties to clebrate with a glass or two of cider.

Might be a few rough ones, see Hunt, don't want anything too posh. Cos of breakages. And if it's too near home the word gets round and you get a lot of gate-crashers. If you're paying, Dad, you don't want gate-crashers, do you?

So we spent several weeks investigating likely rendezvous and decided on the Rock Garden, a fashionable and very noisy but cheerful hamburger restaurant in Covent Garden, right on the Piazza. Flora and I had lunch there and gave it our seal of approval. My lady wife refused to go inside. She hates hamburgers and pop music.

We arranged to hire the upstairs room for tonight, Saturday March 6th, from 8 till 12. The manager kindly agreed that all the guests at Caitlin's party could then go downstairs to the basement and get in to see the live groups for free. The place itself is open till six in the morning. What a strange world it is out there.

Caitlin had said there was no need to order food. People didn't eat food at parties these days. What they do at Caitlin's parties these days is *throw* food at each other. Oh, what jolly fun. As long as you don't have to clean the walls up afterwards.

We agreed on a maximum of seventy guests and I ordered fifty bottles of the house wine, though I didn't reveal this to Caitlin, and seventy hamburger meals, which I didn't reveal either. I thought providing food would keep down the drinking.

We were going to get a live group for our party, perhaps Miles Over Matter, they're very wonderful, at least according to Caitlin, but decided instead just to hire their disco, £40 extra, a bargain already.

Invitations, that put in another three weeks. Caitlin was going to hand-paint each one, but did three before flaking out. She then wanted them printed in four colours, and I agreed, till I discovered the price, so I bought a pad of coloured paper and went to the copying machine at our local post office and duplicated seventy invites.

There was some argument about putting *my* coloured paper inside *their* machine, in case it would be too thick and

block up the intestines. The invites came out looking great, but I failed to get a discount, even though I pointed out I'd used my paper, saving them their white stuff. Oh, the expense. Should I tell you how much it has all cost? No, let's not be churlish. It is a happy day. Least I hope it still is.

Caitlin then scrawled an extra message over each invite, thereby mucking up all my beautiful handiwork on the copying machine. She had decided at the last moment that each guest should come in 'kinky fetish clothing'. Whatever is the world coming to. If Grandma hears about this, bang goes your present, my lass.

That put me in a fix, as I'd agreed to take Flora for the first two hours. What was I going to wear? Could I go as Glen Hoddle?

Flora went as a sort of gypsy and looked terrific and I went in my best black trousers and a white shirt like Manuel from *Fawlty Towers*. That was not intentional, to look like Manuel, and I only said it was after several cheeky young persons had pointed it out.

Have you been to a teenagers' party? I mean in the last hundred years. Desmond Morris would love it. Very anthropological.

I wonder what happened to dancing. You know, two people together, waltzes, dinky two-steps, Valetta, Dashing White Sergeants. I asked the bloke on the disco but he hadn't heard of any of them. Not even a quick-step. All the fast girls did the quick-step in my day.

Most of the girls and the boys were in fancy dress, and none looked too kinky, so that was a relief. It did give it a festive atmosphere from the beginning. Caitlin was in fur. One boy came as a vicar. I noticed a Brownie and a nurse and one girl in cling-flim. The first load of hamburgers, which came with chips and salads and lots of dressings and other bits and pieces, went in a flash. Caitlin had the grace to say you were right, papa.

I showed them how to jive, no, really I was pushed into it, public demand, and the old magic was still there, thanks to practising these last six weeks with Flora. The Sixties is high fashion with teenagers, so they do know what jiving

is. They've seen it on the late-night movies, along with crinolines and bustles.

When my eyes and ears had settled down, I realised that some things had not completely changed. Groups of lads still sat around together, watching groups of girls, sitting around watching. Quite a few were obviously in couples, ah, isn't that sweet, and they seemed ever so clean and healthy. Everyone was kind to Flora and to me, a visitor from another planet.

The thing that did surprise me was the open affection the girls felt for each other, all such good friends and showing it in such a natural way. The boys seemed more hesitant, watchful, far less confident and mature than the girls. The party was being given by a girl so there was a hard core of her life-long girl-friends there, going back to primary school.

I knew many of them from the days of pushing them in prams with Caitlin, playing on the swings, digging in the sand, though if I hadn't been told the names of some of them I would never have believed it. Very slowly, through all that drastic face change and body metamorphosis, I could just make out the relics of a little girl, smiling thinly through. Will I recognise my little Flora when she is eighteen? Will she be a bigger version of the same or will she too be a completely different human being?

We left at ten, by which time the party was well established. The Rock Garden had done us proud, with good service, attentive waiters, but I hope no gate-crashers get in, or silly people do silly things.

Flora has gone to sleep, thrilled with her little self, what a lot of boasting she'll be able to do on Monday morning, and I'm waiting for Jake. He was allowed to take three of his school friends, as a special treat, even though they're all just fifteen and sixteen.

Jake was a bit worried when he heard that Caitlin wanted fancy dress. I just don't want you being ordinary, said Caitlin. I know, said Jake, I'll wear gloves. In the end, he arrived in dark glasses and a beret. Wow.

Comings-of-age in the old days were family occasions, with all the generations joining in, but I thought one person

from the older generation would be more than enough. Me. My wife made an excuse and left herself at home, very happily curled up with a particularly good novel, a big log fire and soppy thoughts about this time, eighteen years ago tonight.

Jake has now just arrived home, very pleased with himself. He got the last bus home and says there was no trouble whatsoever and the party was a big success. The manager bloke ended up chanting soul music over the disco. Jake left promptly at midnight, leaving the eighteen-year-olds to, well, whatever eighteen-year-olds do. I don't expect to see Caitlin for days. Probably not till she's nineteen.

Making Tracks

It's been Flora's Sport's Day today so I felt I should do my bit and turn up and hang about and shout for Raleigh which is the house she's in. It makes you feel sort of proud, know what I mean, brings a lump to the old froat, to hear these lovely little primary school children screaming their heads off for Raleigh, Drake, Grenville and Howard, even though at least 40 per cent of the little treasures come from the West Indies, Cyprus, Pakistan and points East and think that Raleigh is the bloke that invented bicycles.

We true Brits know better, don't we Flora. They're the names of Houses at Brookfield Primary. Yes, but what else, my petal. I dunno. Was they teachers at the school? How do I know. Come on Ra-lee.

I don't do a lot for the school these days and I feel suitably humbled and embarrassed when other parents do so much. I was on the governing board for years and ended up Chairman, but that was when I was young and fit and in my prime. I also ran the School Magazine for several issues, but now I'm old and grey, at least I was till this morning when I carefully took the grey hairs out of my moustache. I have become rather disorientated. A sort of Anouilh has taken over. How do you spell that word? I bet he's a House in a Frog primary school. Come on On-ee.

I think I've been to every Sports Day for fifteen years, ever since Caitlin started there. Jake went through the same school. Neither of them has their name on the programme as holder of the all-time record for 50 yards, sorry, 50 metre races or first year girls high jump. Perhaps Flora will give us immortality.

One year I did do the loudspeaker which meant being shut up in a little box beside the track, which is a very good one, on Parliament Hill, and I was on a real microphone, as used by Highgate Harriers, and I kept up a running commentary, as kids brought me the results of every race, and I exhorted people to get ready for the next event, as instructed by the teachers, and after three hours I realised that after all David Coleman isn't the dum-dum I'd always suspected. I collapsed afterwards. Then I was told nobody had heard a bleeding word. It's a big track, and we're only a little primary school, and all the mums and dads and kids were sitting where there happened not to be a loudspeaker that was working. I immediately retired from all thoughts of being a professional sports commentator, deciding after all I will be a brain surgeon when I grow up.

They can make a lot of noise, even in a little primary school, and I always enjoy my afternoon walks on the Heath when sudden bursts of hysterical screaming waft over the grassy slopes in the stillness of some far wood and the dodgy-looking blokes behind trees, about to be up to no good, don't half get a fright.

'One condition,' said Flora. She's so bossy these days. Whatever will she grow up to become. Answer, Caitlin. 'You can come on one condition.'

What's that, my sweet. I'm so reasonable, all the time, one of my faults, don't tell me.

'As long as you don't wear your shorts,' she said, standing foursquare, putting on her Miss look. 'I don't want to be shown up. You look stupid in them. Is that clear?'

Yes your majesty, your honour, Roger and out. They're quite nice shorts, actually, made them myself, cutting them down from an old pair of jeans, Bermudas I think they call them in American primary houses. I did at least get the message that at forty-six it was time I gave up real jeans but I thought a baggy pair of Bermudas, rather amusing, look at old Hunt, what a card, but of course he has got good legs, I mean, for a bloke of his age.

I never quite know what to wear with them. Obviously not black socks and ordinary shoes, I'm not that stupid, this

isn't Blackpool, do you mind, so I wear my blue training shoes or my Green Flash Dunlop plimsolls though they are a bit cacky, as we used to say in Carlisle. I agonise. Do I have bare legs or not? Shoes, even gym shoes, look a bit silly without socks, but if I wear my only pair of white socks they get filthy the moment you even look at them. Decisions, decisions.

Flora had at least spared me all those problems by her dictat so I set off for the sports in my normal grey trousers. I only have grey trousers, some of them not as normal as they used to be, or even as grey, but all of them began that colour. Over the decades, I've been through the full range of grey. Remember Charcoal Grey. What a craze that was. I can still recall longing for a Charcoal Grey suit when I was at Durham in the Fifties. *Everyone* had one, with any pretensions to be fashionable. The trousers got so shiny in the end that it was like wearing a plastic suit. Plastic hadn't of course been invented back in the Fifties. Don't be stupid, Dad, plastic has always been invented.

I sat with various mums and dads on the grassy slopes while the kids shouted and shrieked and drank disgusting orange juice, that sugary stuff that comes in ten-gallon plastic petrol cans and we don't allow in our house, certainly not, we drink unsweetened orange juice from Sainsbury's which is like drinking pound notes only the taste is much sourer. Various smaller kids were being screamed at, for getting on the track, and several mums were clutching their stomachs, feeling as sick as a parakeet, knowing that their Darren or Jeremy or Winston, we're very mixed in our school, was next on the track and would he let the family name down.

From a distance, these little end-of-term school sports days appear totally disorganised, totally boring and utterly pathetic. It's only when you know the dramatis personae that you understand how genuinely dramatic, nay hysterical, some of the personae are becoming. All human life. Is there?

Our sports were terribly well organised this year, and everything ran completely to time. I've been to them in the past when we've run, or dragged, two hours late, and never

got half the events finished. The headmistress or the PE person has had to bring them suddenly to a halt on the final straight when it's realised that every Mum and Dad has gone home and this year children, it's a dead heat between Raleigh, Drake, Grenville and Howard, thank you, have a nice summer holidays everyone.

I somehow missed Flora's long jump, which she didn't win, though she was second ('me ankle was sore'), but I was looking the right way when her relay started and her team won. Well done, Ra-lee, Ree-lay.

Then the most awful thing happened. They'd done so well, the teachers and parents in charge, their efficiency being beyond reproach, that they decided to put on an extra event. A fathers' race. I tried to hide. Then I said I've got a neighbour's dog to take for a walk, but I'd been grabbed by a bossy teacher, or it might have been Flora, the differences are slight, and found myself standing on the track with eleven other embarrassed dads, of all shapes and sizes and colours, all cursing themselves for having taken the afternoon off work.

It seemed like a Wembley Cup Final out there. Any thought I'd had of it being a pathetic little school event, watched by a few dozen parents, vanished as I felt the red plastic turf beneath me and saw the white lanes of the track curving ahead. I was convinced the eyes of millions were upon me. I do of course tend to go through life thinking everyone is watching me, which is why I'm a bad actor and a poor public speaker and self-conscious and what am I doing, running myself down, I'm the hero this week.

We were lined up and told it would be two circuits of the track and I said that's it, count me out, you must be choking, I know the Royal Free is only minutes away, and they're all watching from the windows, but I'm not giving myself a heart attack, not when the tickets for Gatwick have just come for our summer holidays. That's 800 metres or yards or miles and certainly far too much for me. Shut up and get in line. Then the starting pistol went.

All the kids were screaming, but I could hardly hear them, just a faint buzzing in the ears. I wondered whether I could

turn out to be Alf Tupper, who trained on fish and chips and just arrived and beat the world in his pit-man's clothes, or Wilson of *The Wizard* who lived in a cave. While I'd been thinking about them, I found I'd done one circuit and was still alive, surprise surprise, though four other dads had dropped out, flat on the ground, hoping for oxygen. *Chariots of Fire*, that's it, I thought, lifting up my knees.

Just before the final bend, I put in an extra spurt and I overtook the bloke ahead and I realised it was Andy, the school's PE teacher. He was in the last Olympics. This is not a fib, not even an exaggeration. Look him up. Andy Drzewiecki. He's a weight-lifter, British champion in fact, very famous.

On the last stretch, I found myself waving to the crowd like mad which I knew as soon as I did it was a mistake. Flora would be furious. One must not be flash.

The first Dad home was called Guy Ogden. Now, he is a great runner and recently came 200th in the London Marathon. He won our race by miles. Second was another Dad, John Carrier, who is also a good runner and he too was in the London Marathon, though he came a bit further back, 8,247th to be precise. I didn't recognise the Dad who came third. But guess who came fourth. Yup. Autographs later.

Just think what might have happened if only I'd been allowed to wear my shorts . . .

On His Bike

I don't like interfering in Jake's life. At sixteen he is old enough and wise enough and big enough to make his own mistakes. But today I went along with him to give moral support. Call it being bossy if you will. Thank you. It was a big decision for a young lad to make, so I said I would like to be there. My advice might be useful. Also my cheque book.

He has saved £150 in the last few months, giving it all to me to keep for him. Naturally, when he suddenly wanted it, I didn't have it in cash. I don't keep that amount lying around, not unless I'm expecting to have to spend it on some mad piece of extravagance, such as getting the windows cleaned or buying a pound of French beans.

Jake has had a week-end job since Easter, but I'm not allowed to mention any details. Some things are private. He's been very diligent, working away at Marine Ices for £1.25 an hour. After all these months, he then goes and spends all his £150 in one go. I tell a lie. The bill came to £149.73 and I have it here in front of me, which means I owe him 27p. Considering how long it took, the mental and emotional strain, the aggravation and concentration and wear and tear, I hope he has the decency to let me off the 27p. It was more like going to a psyche shop than a cycle shop.

When I was his age, you could run a family of six, have holidays at Troon, a week-end bungalow at Silloth, keep a Model T in the bath and still have change out of a Penny Farthing. The very thought of ever seeing £150 in one's life was pure fantasy. Whatever has happened to the world. Who

would have thought oh shut up Dad and just get on with it.

I can remember my first bike as if it was yesterday. It was a Raleigh Lenton Sports in green and I got it at TP Bell's in Carlisle, paying it up on the never-never at 13/11d a week. What a strange sum. They didn't have calculators in those days. I earned all the money myself, doing a paper round in the morning and delivering groceries on a bike after school, or have I told you all this, children. Flora, surely I haven't mentioned this to you, well not recently, I mean in the last half-hour. Sorry.

I walked it all the way home as I was too proud, too shy, too worried about riding it. It had a Sturmey-Archer three-speed and I wasn't quite sure how it worked. When I got it home, I cleaned every part, just in case. Kids these days never clean anything, etc. I went to school on it every day from then on, my face a mass of tears in winter as I free-wheeled down this steep hill, Stanwix Bank, and the ice and the rain and the wind was like a terrible torture which I had to overcome by will power.

I had one summer holiday on it, cycling to Cambuslang in Glasgow to my grandmother's house, a distance of some ninety-nine miles. I did it all in one day, which I find hard to believe now. Today, when I happen to be driving along that route, which is now all dual-carriage and motorway, lolling back in my automatic 2.3 Granada, I point out to the family the precise spots, just by that little stream, over there in the heather and bracken, where Daddy rested thirty years ago. Yes, you've told us that as well. When I got to Cambuslang, absolutely knackered, I stayed in bed for a week. Then I cycled home again.

Caitlin and Jake and Flora all had bikes, brand-new ones, bought when they were younger, spare no expense in this family, yes we do spoil them, but they were children's size bikes, bought as birthday or Christmas presents. If you want a bigger bike when you're older, so I told them, then you'll have to work and save up your own money, just as we did, tra la. You're on your own.

I'll handle this, Jake, I said. He'd seen one he fancied, a Carlton Grand Prix, priced at £118.00. I had to read the

price several times, thinking at first it might be £11.80 or even £18.11. My eyes are not so good these days, especially reading prices which in my mind's eye have stayed firmly in the 1950s.

I had to queue for quite a while to get any service as the place was full of people with half bikes or bits of bikes speaking in what seemed like a foreign language to the bloke behind the counter. There were two people serving, but all the customers seemed content to wait for the Boss to serve them. I could tell who the Boss was. He was the one shouting into the telephone, while attending to his customers, while reading the price catalogues, while testing a wheel.

'How much discount for cash,' I asked quickly.

I presumed that most kids, as in my day, would be paying up their bikes. I wanted to say look here, my good man, I happen to be one of the big spenders, I will pay it all now, but for something off, after all, when I bought my new car, I got 14 per cent off for cash, but I could see he was a busy man.

He gave me a quick look, then turned to serve someone. I had to repeat my question, much to Jake's fury. *All* sales were cash, he said. Positively no discount. Take it or leave it. Next please.

I told you, muttered Jake. So I had to queue up again in order to say, very humbly, yes I would take it. He had a Smike-like youth doing the man-handling of the bikes, and also repairs in some sort of workshop at the back, and he was ordered to get out the bike we wanted and check it over. That seemed to take ages, as Smike was constantly being given other orders, most of which he seemed to get wrong.

No pump, I said to Jake, showing off my knowledge of cycle technology. Look, it's missing. So I queued up again, only to be told to keep quiet a moment, please. The Boss was up a ladder this time, counting sprockets, and I'd interrupted him at a vital point. He came down, giving me the big sigh treatment, and said of course there's no pump, that model doesn't come with a pump.

Stupid old me. I might have guessed that at £118 you couldn't expect any extras. Jolly lucky to have wheels.

He eventually handed me something which looked like a spray for killing insects in the garden, nothing like a pump as I know it, offering it in metal or plastic, quick, there is a queue. I chose the plastic at £2.83. Then I had to queue up again to ask him how to use it. There seemed to be no adapter.

It's a funny thing about age. I have no inhibitions about asking stupid questions. I don't mind at all displaying my ignorance. I am more than willing to concede stupidity and bow to the expert, as long as he will kindly explain or, best of all, do it for me. He gave the pump a quick blow, to show how it was done. Then I tried, and the whole thing seemed to explode, and he had to return and do it again. Jake, meanwhile, was trying to hide, hoping no one would think I was with him.

A bell, I said. I see there isn't a bell. Not one of the extras, ha ha, so we better buy one.

'I don't want a bell,' said Jake in my ear.

The man smiled. *Nobody* buys bells these days, he said. Certainly not boys. Only little kids on trikes buy bells. Where have I been all these years.

Then we agonised over lights, and got them at £7 for two, then a carrier frame, a bargain at £4.50, deciding to save up later for the pannier bags as they all seemed to cost a fortune. Oh, and a water bottle, Jake said he had to have one, but that was a snip, compared with all the other essentials and cost only £1.25.

I never had a lock for my bike, back in the olden days. No one stole things, when I was young. Ask my Mum. Nor did we have homosexuals, rapists, nasty books, violent films, trade unions, strikes, bombs or bad language on television. And it was hot and sunny every summer. We were happy then.

Jake said he would have to have a lock. Bikes are always being pinched in our area. The woman opposite got her rear wheel stolen last week, even though she'd locked the bike to a railing. The Boss sent his assistant to explain Locks to us, the theory of, and we were told the best one was £23. At that price, I said, you would need a lock to lock up the

lock. He was off at once, sighing with his eyes, to serve elsewhere.

We finally chose a lock at £4.15, one of those chain things, long enough to go round both wheels. Very cunning. Then we had a long and earnest talk about Insurance. With a good lock, was it worth it? Or should we take out Insurance, and give the lock back? I think six people got served while I pondered Insurance.

I asked the Boss if the £12, which was what he quoted, covered theft from anywhere, and he handed me a pile of leaflets and forms.

'You can read, it,' he said, 'I haven't got the time. I've got people to serve . . .'

At long last, we got all the necessary accessories assembled, and the bill totted up. Only two hours had elapsed from first walking into the shop.

I was looking at the bike seat and it did seem abnormally narrow, like sitting on a piece of steel wire. I would find it hellish to sit on, not of course that it's my bike, or my money, and it is the modern style, and if Jake's happy, why should I make any comments, but of course I couldn't stop myself.

'What?' said the Boss. 'Too narrow? That seat too narrow?'

The whole shop was enjoying his declamatory style, perfected over decades of dealing with dum-dums.

'They don't come any broader than that. Unless *you* want a *woman's* seat. Is that what you would like . . .?'

I paid the cheque at once and followed Jake out into the street. I should really have let him buy it all on his own. He probably could have done it in a tenth of the time. I have promised not to interfere any more.

It stands gleaming in the hall, so sleek and sophisticated and scientific. It has ten gears, none of which is a Sturmey or an Archer. I didn't dare ask about them.

Oh Levels

Flora has decided what she wants to do after Primary School. She wants to take a year off before she goes to Secondary School. Oh, you know, the usual things. Bum around Europe. Perhaps India. Discover oneself. Just see how it goes, but anyway, a year off, that's what I really fancy doing.

She hasn't actually put it in those exact words, as she's only nine, but she has heard the Big Ones, now that O- and A-level exams are over, going on about their future plans and the plans of all their contemporaries, and a year off sounds pretty good to her. It could be catching. Why should Sixth Formers have all the fun. It would help the economy and keep down the unemployment figures if everyone had a year off, every second year. You do feel rather exhausted at the age of five when you fly up to the first year Infants. You deserve a break. Then when you go up to the Juniors, wow, take it easy, let's sit back and think about things.

It is an established fashion once you've finished A-levels, to have some sort of year off, even if all you're doing is taking a year off before commencing a lifetime off. We never had such indulgences. On the conveyor belt, we were, back in the Sixties. Heads down. Ours was not to reason why. With one's nose to the sticking place, one put one's best foot to the grindstone and hoped that a 2:2 would impress Mr Marks and Mr Spencer sufficiently to offer a start as a management trainee.

Some things don't change. There's still a strange feeling at this time of the year as the nation waits for the O and A results. You start off in June convinced you've made a

mess of them all, then time passes, hopes spring, and by August you begin to think yes, I *could* get A in French, perhaps even in Maths and English, that was quite a good answer really, even though I should have done the other one.

Jake has said goodbye to Biology for ever. Whatever happens, bye bye, Biology. His notes have gone, even though I've screamed at him. What if you have to re-sit. What if years ahead you decide to take up Biology again. What if Flora, when she's sixteen, just loves Biology and could use your notes? It'll all be different by then, he says. Oh, yeh.

We'll probably be in the Lakes when his O-level results come through, but he won't have his results sent up there. You're only allowed to leave one stamped addressed envelope, so his school says, and he wants it left here. He'll pick it up himself, when he gets back, in his own good time, from wherever it is he might be going.

We're also waiting for Caitlin's A-level results. Caitlin? I can hardly remember her. The moment her last exam was over, that was it. This is the strangest feeling of all. Eighteen years of non-stop chat and action and bingo, it seems to have come to an end. Usually, friends, things happen slowly in life. It's only when you decide to look up that you see, yes, a new pattern has been slowly emerging. Now we do this. Then we did that. However did the change take place. But with Caitlin, our oldest and very dear one, it has happened not just overnight but overminute.

She is staying at present in Islington with some friends. Who isn't. One feels sort of out of things, living this boring old suburban, domestic life. It's not quite a squat but something called short-term community housing. I've been there, and it looks like a squat to me. But then what do I know. Mortgages, rates, doing the garden, digging the weeds, who could ask for more, now I've got older, saying my prayers, when I'm sixty-four, I mean forty-six, tra la. You've got to larf. It's either that or calling the Police.

She does ring us every day, which is very kind, and drops in every second day. Today she came for some soap, so she can get a wash at Caledonian Road baths. She also took

some tins of tomatoes, some rice and probably other things, but I was too polite to stop her at the front door and search all her carrier bags. We've actually gained since she left us. The food bill has dropped. We should be so lucky.

The bell on a string which I rigged up five years ago when she became a teenager lies there in tatters. I shed a little tear every time I pass it. I devised a complicated method of pulling the string every time the phone went. With her being on the top floor, rotten records on at full blast, we got sick and tired of going up the stairs or screaming every time it was for her, which it seemed to be all the time. This bell on a string was a brill idea. You can use it yourself. I won't need it any more. Not for a while. It broke four weeks ago and we never got round to mending it. Why should we. Life moves on. Sick tempus parrotus fugit.

Has she left for ever? Or is it just for the summer? We don't know. I sit in the corner, doing my knitting, waiting to be told. She won't let Flora move into her room yet as she doesn't know her definite plans for the next few years, till we see what the A-levels bring. But Flora has not to touch anything, do you hear that, or else. That room is private.

I can now close the front door at ten o'clock every night, bring the cat in, put the milk bottles out, put the cat back out again. What am I doing. We don't have a cat. Who let that beast from next door in our house. I've told you. I'm so disorientated. This is a betwixt and between whiles. A marking time sort of phase. The days are in a daze.

Then I go upstairs, having locked up, safe in the knowledge that no one will be coming in at one in the morning and banging around. After all these years we've lain there, wondering, should we wait up, no you go, no I'll go. Now we can get back to normal, the long battle is over. Bloody hell. Jake still isn't in. I'd better unlock it. Any moment now Flora will be starting all those high jinks.

I've told Flora no, my petal, *you* will be going straight back to school in September, no messing for you, my lass. I don't care what Caitlin might be doing. She's eighteen, getting on twenty-nine, and it's her life, anyway.

What Flora is dreading next term is the Normans. No,

not that scruffy family in the flats. You know, those blokes that came over with William the Conk. Her teacher began the year which has just ended by telling them, now children, we're going to do the Normans. There was a tremendous groan all round, much to the teacher's surprise. 'We've dunem. We dunem last term, Miss.'

The teacher thought hard and said ah yes, but, children, listen to me. *This* time the Normans will be different.

'It wasn't,' said Flora at the end of last term. 'It was *exactly* the same.'

Little does she know that she could be doing the Normans for ever, till she's twenty-one. I did the Romans every year when I was at Primary School. Jake fears he will be doing the English nineteenth century next year, once again, if he chooses History as one of his A-levels. My Jake, the Sixth former. Yup. Come September.

I wonder what it will be like when we don't live our life in school terms. That will be the strangest thing of all. I can't wait.

Youth Opportunities

Now that Caitlin and Jake have got their A- and O-levels behind them, conversations round the table have become a bit limited, with none of those boring GCE things to grind on about.

Caitlin has got the next five years lined up, at least in theory, depending on acts of God and whether the call of the wild gets too strong or some new and amazing squat comes up. She doesn't seem all *that* thrilled, but when you've done so much, what new thrills are there. I'm v. pleased. Perhaps in five years time there might be some jobs around. How nice to be able to have something to do till then.

She got through her three A-levels, which I thought was very good, considering her fun-filled life, with more than enough to get into the University of her choice. She got two Bs and a C. I like to think that in my day I got three Bs, but I've taken a few liberties with my memory over the years, especially as when I did A-levels they didn't give you grades. I got three marks of around 60 per cent. Honest. The master said. As, you think? With inflation, they must be that by now.

She has deferred this university of her choice, which shall be nameless, to protect the innocent, until the following year, as she wanted to take a year off, don't we all, and I said fine, but you won't get no dosh from me, sweetie pie. So she is going to Art College, starting next month, to do a Foundation Year. Lucky beggar. I'm all for extra education, of any sort. Keeps them off the streets.

After that, she can do her four-year university course, which includes a year in America as she is going to read

American Studies. Hmm. That could be a clue. Then after that, she won't have many years to put in before her old age pension.

Most of her friends seem to be taking a year off, if not a life off. I have two of her boyfriends in the house at the moment, two unemployed young gentlemen, squatter types, perfectly content to have nothing whatsoever planned for the next five years, or the next fifty, and they can't understand why any father should even think about such things. Shows my age, doesn't it.

They're not staying here, I'm not that daft, although from the silence upstairs they could have fallen asleep. I decided I would offer them a little job, help out, what with a car to run. Yes, they each drive a car, proper wrecks, one which cost only £15, but bloody hell, how on earth can they even pay for the petrol. I was lucky to get them as it's so hard to get staff these days. I am convinced that we must be living in an age of *full* employment, despite those nasty newspapers putting around horrid rumours to discredit lovely Mrs Thatcher.

For example, and I'll come to Jake's O-levels in a minute, do hold on, I went on the train yesterday to York, on the famous Inter-City 125, and both going up and coming back the dining car was cancelled. Buffet only. 'Staff shortages,' so I was told. Our football pitches on Hampstead Heath, for which I pay a fortune every year on behalf of our Sunday morning football team, are two weeks late this year as they can't get them ready in time. 'Staff shortages.' I asked at Sainsbury's for a boy to help me with the £130 worth of groceries we had just bought, I have the bill here, as long as a roll of wallpaper, but they said sorry, staff shortages. In an ice cream parlour in Chalk Farm, and in a tea shop in South End Green, both on the same day, I heard them asking for staff, pleading for anyone to work, part time or full time. And have you tried to get a plumber to turn up or someone to mend the roof? There you are. Sobvious. They just put out those terrible unemployment figures to divert the public's attention from the Royal Family.

These two jokers upstairs are redecorating Caitlin's room,

ready for Flora to move in. It was either that or getting it fumigated. My wife agreed they could do the bedroom on two conditions. One, no HP sauce. She caught them eating a packet of chips in the house the other week, how disgusting can you get, then they had the affrontery to ask for some ketchup, missus. Certainly not, said she. So they went round the corner shop and got some, carrying it over a doorstep which never in its life has known such aromas. Secondly, no smoking. Surprisingly, they agreed to both conditions.

They were due to start work here at ten this morning, so I rushed round buying all the paints, sandpaper, brushes, rollers, you don't expect workers to have tools do you, and of course they didn't start till twelve. Then they asked for tea, toast and yes, perhaps a boiled egg, Hunt, sokay, we can make it, fanks. They did work till three, then went for dinner. They're hard at it again, whatever it is they're hardly at up there. Lovely lads. Great workers. So lucky to have them. I might lock them in so British Rail or the GLC Parks departments can't pinch them.

We've had endless moral arguments, round the camp fire of an evening, because so many of Caitlin's friends who are going to University in a year's time are taking social security on their year off. No, I won't start that again. Gives me a headache. Am I becoming reactionary in my old age? When I was, I had to struggle, for every, etc, please fill in your own blanks.

Jake also did well in his exams, passing all nine O-levels, including three grade A's, which was exactly the same as Caitlin, wasn't that strange, Flora, are you listening. We've had agonies about which three A-level courses he should take and they have changed almost every day, but the latest call over is English Literature, History, Politics, which are the ones he got As in. My son the sixth-former. I'm still practising. My daughter the art student. I feel a hundred years old. I'll be lying about their ages soon, just to make myself seem younger.

Jake's sixth form sounds trific. His boys' comprehensive has just amalgamated at sixth form level with the girls' comprehensive next door, which is something that should

have happened years ago, and it's like being at a sixth form college by the sound of it. Some of these girls did brilliantly and got A grades in everything, so that should keep the boys on their toes which is a useful position to be in if the washroom's crowded and you can't see to comb your hair in the mirror.

Now little Flora, just nine years old, sorry, but I can't type out nine years and eleven months every time. On Hallowe'en she'll be into double figures. My daughter, the ten-year-old. Something terribly complicated has happened to her, as if I haven't got enough problems trying to understand sixth-form time-tables and how to get a mandatory grant from our local education authority for a foundation art year. Have you ever filled in a form for a grant? I'm just going to apply for the basic minimum. Life is too short. I could lose a fortune in time, just trying to understand it.

Flora is in a mixed third and fourth year class. Most of her class are really fourth year children, in their final year at primary school, but Flora and some others are only third year in age, I do hope you are folllowing all this, and will therefore be in a top class two years running. I might have got a few details wrong there, but it has been a long summer and I'm not quite as quick as I used to be.

'Must we have an imbecile sitting with us at meals,' said Jake the other evening when all I'd done was ask the same simple question, admittedly twice, about his History syllabus.

So, that's the latest progress report on the three of them, bang up to date, as of this moment. Oh no, don't bother to ask about me. I don't count. No no, please. I'll just sit here in the corner knitting. And paying the bills.

Toy Symphony

Flora has given up the piano. Another stage in life over, another milestone, my how they fly past, goodness don't they grow up quickly, whatever happened to that little gurgling baba, who is that stranger at the door. I don't mind time pushing on, squire, it's the detritus left behind that bothers me. What the hell am I going to do with that piano.

It's been in the local paper all week-end but not a sniff, not a tinkle, not even a wrong number. We bought it seven years ago for Caitlin and then she gave it up, having passed two exams, or was it three, I can't remember. She burned all the certificates the other day, along with her life-saving badges and certificates for gym and a letter saying she was runner-up for the Green Cross Code. Some people have no respect for history. I did try to save them from the bonfire but no, gone for ever, all that effort, up in smoke. Flora took over the piano and passed no certificates, as her teacher did not believe in exams, this is the 1980s, not those meritocractic 1970s. That's the end of the line. From now on, folks, we're a non-piano-playing family. Downhill all the way.

We bought it for £350, paying £50 for a six-month hire in the first place, to see if Caitlin liked it, and then the balance later, which is a good system. Seven years, so, let me see, beautiful bit of wood, well cared for, made by the famous R.G. Payne, over-strung, underpriced, yes, I'll take £700 for it. It must have doubled at least in seven years. So I rang the firm we bought it from and after endless delays the bloke turned up and said £200, take it or leave it. What a cheek. So it's in the paper at £400. We shall see. And if

we don't see, I suppose I'll have to eat my humble tail between my legs and beg him to take it.

Flora has now started the clarinet. For a brief moment in time, she was doing only *one* activity. I could hardly believe it. At her peak, she had up to five different things I was rushing her to every day, or so it seemed. They have all finished, except for Funky Disco, or Dunky Fisco as my mother insists it's called, which is on Saturdays at the Pineapple Studios in Covent Garden. *Everyone* goes there. And now we also have the clarinet which is to be on Sundays at midday.

For a whole week we've sat and worshipped this new instrument, a brand new, shining clarinet, made by Boozey and Hawkes, so it says, whom I thought were just music publishers. We've paid £24 for a six-month hire and if she hasn't given it up by then and gone on to brain surgery or hang gliding, we will pay in all £154. She's had one lesson so far which consisted of putting it together. I could hardly believe that such a little thing could take so much assembling. Flora loves it. Best part of it. All you did with the boring old piano was open the lid. This is like putting the GPO Tower together from Lego.

I have been allowed to have one blow, after I'd washed my hands and begged and pleaded, and I couldn't get a sound. My wife has tried and failed. Jake couldn't do it either. My sister Marion, social worker of this parish, maintains she got a little sound, but she's a fibber. Only Flora has proved that it actually is alive and works. Five notes she's got. In order. We've got a prodigy on our hands. My daughter, the clarinettist.

It has a neat little case, takes up no room, whereas that piano is just a lump, what are we going to do with it. My wife has already re-allocated its space, working out where a blanket box will go, that a new lamp will be bought, how the plants can go elsewhere. I half expect to come down in the morning and find the piano in tears. It must have heard us talking about it by now. The unwanted lodger. Letting out its bed before it's even moved on.

I would really like to keep it, memories of such happy

times, tra la, part of our legend, but she is ruthless. Out, never darken our carpet again and the filth behind it really is disgusting.

At every stage, I always want to keep hold of the artefacts as proofs of the paths we've been along. My memory is not what it was. I look at the children, all enormous now, and find it impossible to believe I pushed them in the pram and rolled with them on the carpet. Yet when you *are* at that stage, you appear to be stuck in a groove, time stands still and you can never imagine them not being little, or that the next stage will ever come, other than the one you are in now or some such tosh, what has happened to this paragraph.

She said that the climbing frame was dead. Jake, it is true, had not played on it for several years and Flora had become bored with it, far too big, so it was out, damn spot, I mean damp spot. I tried to move it and bits of green mould came away in my hand. I was able to face getting rid of that, if only just, as I have it preserved on our cine films, all those marvellous parties that Jake had when it was turned into a castle or tent or tree and all those innocent little boys scrambling over it, those lads now six foot and either working in shops or claiming social security.

I did manage to salvage the first toy that we every bought in our whole parental life. I got it several months before Caitlin was even born, which is now over eighteen years ago, when I happened to see it at Ostrobogolis, a local toy shop. It's a big floppy sort of animal, made of brightly coloured felt. We called it Fattybo and we used to sit and look at it, our best loved possession, but wondering if perhaps I was tempting fate by buying something for our unborn first-born. We even decorated Caitlin's room round it, matching its main colours, dark brown and orange, a room that doesn't exist any more. Our ground floor is now one long room and Caitlin, where is she these days. We have colour snaps to prove it, but snaps don't tell the real story. Caitlin did want to take it to her squat, could she be a romatic, deep down, but I refused. I've seen her place, and her friends, and they won't care for Fattybo the way we will care for Fattybo.

The toy chest has long gone. That was a fitted unit, a sort of little bench against a wall that you lifted up and put the toys inside then sat at to do your little drawings. No bottom in this house is ever going to be small enough again to fit it, so it had to go. But we kept the building bricks, for our grandchildren, ahh, and also a box of Galt farm animals because they look so decorative, even the ones that Jake used to eat. Then there was the doll's house which I used to love playing with as it had all the rooms covered with little bits of different wallpapers we have had in this house in the last twenty years. It's out on loan. No, not the V&A, though they did ask. The cradle, a very posh one made of cane which cost a fortune at Heal's, has subsequently seen the birth of another twenty babies. It was last heard of in Muswell Hill. I always ask the parents to leave their baby's name on it when they borrow it. Must have all the records.

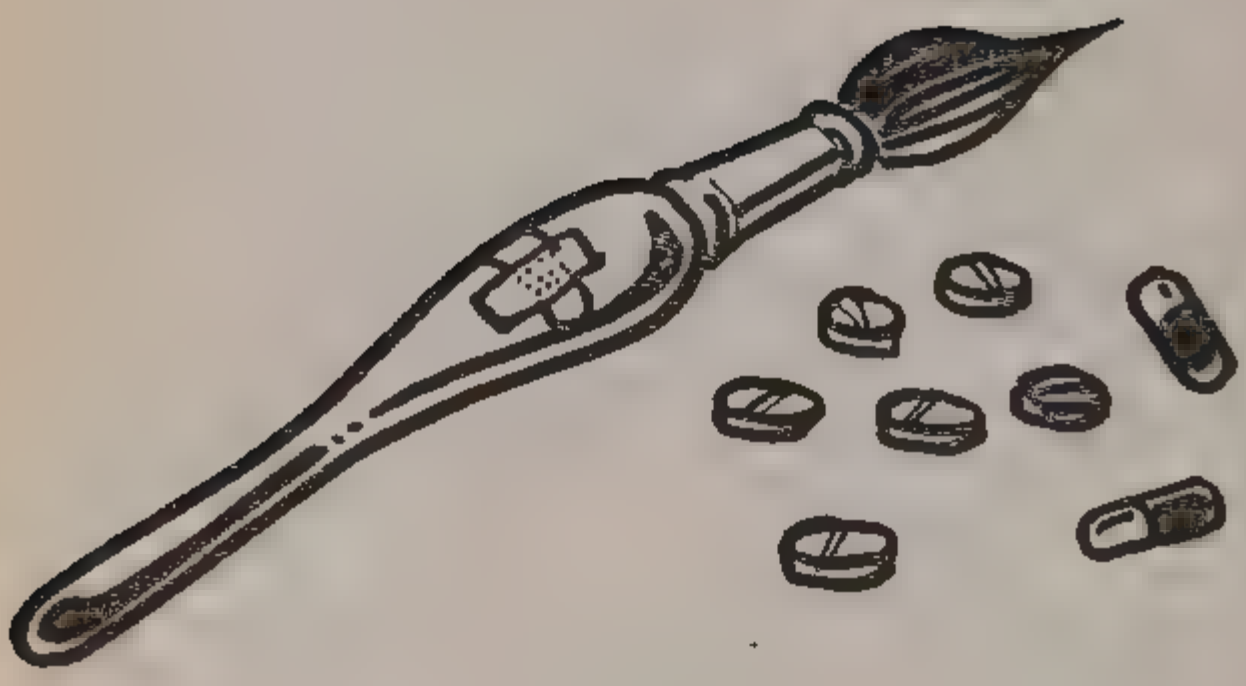
We still have the swing, though it is far too small for Flora. It stands forlornly at the bottom of the garden, a sign at least that we are not yet a childless couple. We did offer it to the family next door, when we decided to get rid of it, for their little girl Jessica. They very smartly said no, how kind, but it would be nice if Jessica could come over our wall, from time to time, and play on it. Which is what happens. So we have this old swing, cluttering up our garden, just for Jessica to use, when I could be using the space for, oh I dunno, wholemeal bread, goats, potatoes, chickens, spinach, muesli and all the other stuff right-thinking people are growing in their gardens in these hard times. I know I never will, so come on over Jessica, you can keep using it.

My wife's main concession, when we were throwing out all these time capsules, was to go through all the children's books and keep the best. Jake has every Biggles, and intends to keep them, but it's the ones for younger children we particularly wanted to keep, by John Burningham and Maurice Sendak. We're also keeping the Beatrix Potters, though they all hated them. Our great-grandchildren will love Beatrix Potter, or else they'll get a belt round the lug-hole. When you're a great-grandparent, you're allowed to

do that. This is a Golden Age for children's fiction, not just because I've got my first children's book out this week. It's for Flora, about Flora, and I intend to surprise her with the first copy for her tenth birthday which is Hallowe'en. What a great father. I never cease to impress myself.

I fear the next thing will be the snooker table. She is already measuring it up, working out which sofa can take its place. I admit Jake and I don't play as passionately as we did last year, but hardly an evening goes by without us having one gameroo after supper. We men go straight from the table to the table, a tradition I greatly enjoy. (Clear up or wash the dishes? Do me a favour, what do we have all these women for.) Snooker signposts in the evenings.

I know this ritual won't go on for ever and Jake will become bored and so another stage will be over. But what's the hurry. It's not doing any harm. She wants it out now or folded away. Some people have no feelings. Family life moves on quickly enough without giving it any little pushes.



Visiting Time

Has Caitlin left home? We watch and wait and look for signs and examine tea leaves, which is very hard these days, since tea-bags came in. Is this the beginning of the end, we ask ourselves over the cocoa, and is our first-born bird about to flee the nest and leave us all forlorn, ha ha, ho ho.

Everywhere round our area I meet people who say is it really true, your teenage daughter is gainfully occupied *and* she's not living at home, snot fair, some people have all the luck. So I preen myself and take the credit for this marvellous coup. After all, not only do most school-leavers not have any work, they are at home in bed for ever till the last syllable of recorded TIM, being too lazy to look under the bed at their rotten watch.

Since July, when Caitlin got her A-level results, she has been in this awfully nice squat with these awfully nice people over in Islington. Technically, it's community housing, or some such, but it looks and feels like a squat to me. She pops in for a bath and for packets of spaghetti and other vital vittels and she and her boyfriend have a meal here once or twice a week. Usually, it's Sunday lunch and usually she's late but of course we don't moan and groan any more, being so pleased to see her. Who cares if it's an hour after we've all finished and the roast is cold and Jake has finished his thirds and I'm asleep on the couch. Take it easy, action.

Every morning since she started her Foundation Year course at Art College at the beginning of October she has got my stupid wife to ring her at eight o'clock sharp, wakey wakey, rise and shine, this is your early morning ogre speaking. Yes, even squats have phones these days, though

it's just a box in the hall and they have to pay to get out which of course means we sometimes get reversed charge calls, not that I mind, me, moaning and complaining, you've got the wrong person, missus. I just smile and think well, I am saving on all those TIM calls since she left home.

She's working very hard at art college, and enjoying it, though I worry that she might enjoy it too much and not go on to University next year, as arranged, but let's take one thing at a time, squire, we'll cross our bridges when they're hatched.

I left home for good at eighteen, the age Caitlin is now, though I didn't realise it at the time. I went orf to Durham for four years and never came back, except for a few weeks during the long summer holidays. Unlike Caitlin, I didn't have my own room to leave behind. I shared a bed with my younger brother, plus the lodgers my mother took in the minute I'd left home.

Caitlin has always had her own room, oh we spoiled them rotten. They've got all their own teeth as well, nothing shared or second-hand, own towels, own toothbrushes, own face-cloths, own plates. I'm the only one who eats out of dirty dishes, that's if no one else is watching. Saves a fortune.

Caitlin's room is now empty and waiting for her, should she decide she needs it. It's not the room she used to have, as Flora has now taken that over, but it's still a room of her own, though slightly smaller than her first room.

She has spent about a week in this room so far. She arrived home one evening feeling rotten and after a good meal and bath went to bed, but in the night she woke with terrible pains. Even I got up, and I'm a sod when it comes to getting up in the night, whether it's poorly children or poorly wives or poorly tortoises. I'm only interested in poorly me. After long discussions, I decided I had better ring the Emergency Doctor. Have you ever done this? There's a list of top ten numbers I hate ringing, which begins with British Rail Enquiries, followed by London Transport, then any taxi or minicab or plumber, followed by the doctor in fourth position. That's the ordinary doc, of course. When

it comes to the Emergency version, it's straight up to Number One.

I was transferred by recording machines all round London before I reached a human voice at last and I poured out all my troubles, I mean Caitlin's troubles. 'Don't ask me, dear. I'm the worst person in London to ask. I know less about medicine than anyone. I'm just the telephonist.'

Forty minutes, so she said, that would be the quickest an emergency doctor could come. At least in London there is such a system. Whatever would we do in the Lake District. Or in Bulgaria. That's where Caitlin was on her summer hols. What if it had happened there.

I sat looking out of the front window, my nose pressed against the panes, staring into the darkness. It was two o'clock in the morning. I've never been up that late for years. Even the burglars had gone home. I was watching for the doctor's car, ready to pounce, in case he gave one light knock at the door, then disappeared again.

He was an Indian gentleman, very solemn, no nonsense. I was hoping to have a bit of a chat, wanting to find out what sort of doctors opt for this emergency work, for ever going to strange places in the dark, called out by some very strange people, such as me, this bloke in his 1960s dressing-gown with his inane grin, asking dopey questions, keeping him back from his medical duties.

He spent most of his brief visit filling in forms. He could not believe Caitlin was called Caitlin and asked her to repeat it four times, writing it down wrongly each time. It is a daft name, I know, and few people ever get it right first time, or know its origin. I notice these days that her new friends call her Kate, what a liberty, who do they think they are, then I remember, she doesn't live here any more. She can call herself anything now. After the doctor had written it down a fifth time, and I was beginning to think I'd called out the Emergency Gallup polster by mistake, he then examined her.

There's always the worry when you call out a doctor that the rotten child will have recovered by the time he comes and be jumping all over the house and you'll be marked

down in the black book as dum-dum parent. This happened to us twice with Jake when he was little, then of course when we didn't ring in time, it was *Emergency Ward Ten* and he had to be rushed direct to hospital for an abscess which we had been laughing about, accusing him of making it up. He'll never let us forget that.

He gave her some pills and she quickly got back to sleep. In the morning, I had to go with a prescription to the chemist but he had only half of these particular antibiotics in stock. Emergency docs prescribe stuff which no one else ever uses, so this jaunty chemist johnny said. I went back the next morning—and he wasn't so jaunty. His chemist shop had been wrecked overnight. Some gang had got in, looking for drugs, then smashed up the place. It gave me some good chat to tell Caitlin. I said of course they'd been after her pills. These emergency docs use hot stuff.

She has now gotten over whatever it was, poor lass. I think it was cystitis, spelling an optional extra, or did he say an inflammation of the stomach or kidney. I'm mentioning it now that she's better, although, touch wood, one should not go around talking about children being ill, or boasting they are never ill. She was always a good patient, stoical and resigned, no bother, never demanding attention or treats, not like some people I could mention. Me, for example.

We were the ones un-stoical and un-resigned when she was very little and we weren't used to children's illness. We had one of those stupid Cry Calls when she was a baby and I was always convinced she had stopped breathing when she was ill and I would rush up to find a wire disconnected or the battery dead. By the time Jake arrived, we had disconnected the Cry Call. With Flora, we had thrown it away.

I now realise that one will always worry about them being ill, even when they are groan up and living away from home. I could never understand my mother being interested in my movements when I'd left home and it was a right drag to tell her, even if it was just some old story. I'm all for old stories. I hope they'll always tell me good fiction. They can keep the truth a secret.

Caitlin's visit was only a short one, and she returned to the squat once she had recovered, so I didn't have time to discuss things, nor was it really the right atmosphere to talk about plans and the future and arrangements. What an old fuss-pot I am becoming. Those tea-bags are only for Caitlin's use, so what does it matter if they never get used. Those black plastic sacks can surely stay unpacked for a few months longer. Plans? People don't have plans these days. We all live from one morning call to the next morning call.

School Journey's End

There were quite a few tears in the playground, which was strange, not because it was the playground but because the tears were coming out of the eyes of those sorts of kids I'd put down as toughies, know what I mean, usually full of old lip, always effing and blinding, but when the chips are down they've got very little sauce and they are quickly revealed as marshmallow souls and what a menu this is turning out to be.

It was a scene which happens once a year in every playground. I have witnessed it myself twice already. All the little ten-year-olds getting on the coach, ready for the school trip, waving bye-bye to the mater and pater, mum and dad, auntie and nan, Gran and Grandad, Her Feller and His Fancywoman.

I suddenly had a vision that they were all wearing gas masks, with labels round their necks and very long short trousers and old-fashioned caps and the memories came flooding back. No, I was never an evacuee, but I've seen the films. I was an evacuator, if that's the word. We received evacuees in our council house in Carlisle during the war and I hated them, flash Cockney gits who got all this sympathy from teachers because they'd been in the London bombing, lucky sods. Nothing exciting like that ever happened in Carlisle.

It's been so quiet all week, not having Flora at home. Books do make a room but children make a home. I don't count teenagers as children, far less human beings, in fact what are they, you might well ask, there must be a reason for them, a purpose to their lives, I'll let you know when I get any clues.

Only three round the table has made mealtimes so polite and civilised. You really need four to make a crowd, then you have two-way conversations, or more, as each person holds two, their own conversation and the one they are trying to interrupt. I was talking first, that is not true, what a liar, oh shut your glump.

Jake has been remarkably quiet this week anyway, but then so would you, if you were going to a White Party. Of course he wasn't going at first, stupid idea, who do they think they are, I'm not wearing white. Stupid.

When Caitlin was sixteen, all her parties seemed to end in tears and terrible scenes. And that was just the parents. There did seem to be a spate of vandalism at the time, gate-crashers causing havoc, breaking windows, wrecking rooms, but that seems to have subsided now. I'm talking about a long time ago. God, it must have been 1981. So hard to remember that far back when so much has happened since. Perhaps Jake's contemporaries got the party-wrecking craze out of their system when they were fourteen.

He went to one party the other week where you had to wear jackets. Amazing. What a terrific wheeze. Most original. I suppose jackets and ties are very eccentric these days. I'm surprised the police didn't run them in.

Remember when drapes were not allowed at dance halls? And DAs were banned. Course, I'm really going back now. There's a good sociological survey to be done on prohibited dress throughout the centuries. Entry will be refused to the cave ball to anyone wearing woad. Gentlemen will not be served in powdered wigs.

Jake has his white bowling shoes, so that's a start, but should he wear his white Spurs shirt or not? He doesn't care about them much these days, what a turncoat, and hasn't been all season, oh no you haven't, I'm the true supporter now, but then he does have his Saturday job.

The big problem has been trousers, as you're supposed to wear *all* white. He is now halfway through bleaching a pair of old jeans and the kitchen smells like a laundry. It's working brilliantly so far, and the blue has almost completely gone. I came down this morning and found little

patches of denim, about four inches square, all along the radiator, drying out. He got started on the jeans, then realised there were some holes, so he had to start getting patches bleached to the same colour, or lack of colour. Not easy, you know, going to a White Party.

I wish Flora had been here to witness this little cottage industry. She loves the idea of Jake going to parties and is constantly picking up the phone, hoping to hear conversations she's not supposed to hear, or watching him get ready to go out.

For a few weeks now, Jake has had his hair in a middle parting. He looks just like my dad. He always wore his hair like that, in the style of those pre-war footballers, which of course he was, after a fashion. I missed out on middle partings. Wouldn't do me much good now, even if I tried. Not with my hair. I'm getting a middle spacing, rather than a middle parting, a sort of thin bit at the front, but we don't talk about it.

We have had no communication from Flora all week, though we did tell her not to bother anyway. Far better to send postcards to the grandparents in Carlisle. Much more important. Oh no, I tell a lie, we did get a note on Monday, saying sorry this is a boring letter, but Mrs Pyne (the headmistress) says we have to write home *now* and I've nothing to say as the activities haven't started yet, it's not fair, I've got nothing to say.

They've been at Butlin's at Clacton, or Claqùe-de-Nancy as they say in France. I met a postman once who swore he saw that written on an envelope. And also Arich Arbor. Go on, you can work that one out. Don't be lazy.

All week I have talked to parents who have had a letter or postcard every day from their loved ones which means, boast boast, what a loving family. So in reply I boast about the *lack* of letters, oh we don't care, we told Flora not to write, meaning that we bring them up to be independent, not clinging. It's very complicated, parental boasting. The ones who run them down are often showing off most.

The weather has been poor, but then it's traditional at all school camps to stay soaked and muddy all week and

never change your clothes, gosh what fun. There was some incident involving a tiger at Colchester Zoo, so one Mum told me, and a boat trip when the water came over their wellies, but of course we haven't been told anything, I mean we *instructed* her not to tell us anything till her return, that's the sort of family we are, don't you know.

She did ring last night, Friday night, the last night of her holiday, which was a bit daft, having waited so long, but they'd all just discovered how to ring reverse charges. She got through two minutes after we had gone out, so she got Jake. Hard cheese, Flora. It's yeh, whatjawant, yeh, grunt, grunt, yeh, then he hangs up. Not exactly a polished telephone conversationalist, our Jake.

Flora came home half an hour ago. I went by car to school to pick her up, and ended up parking practically back home again, as every parent had done the same. There we all were, exactly one week later, standing in the same little groups, wondering and waiting. No tears this time, though I could sense a few worried thoughts. Luckily, the coach was only a few minutes late. Jake was on one school trip when the coach was four hours late and there were nearly heart attacks all over the playground.

They all looked so embarrassed and self-conscious, getting off the coach, half-catching their parents' eyes, then looking away, laughing with their friends, especially if it was the friend they had wanted to sit with. What a worry that is for every child on a school trip. But they did look clean and tidy, even glowing, a perfect advert for the Welfare State. They don't wear uniform, at our primary school, but for this trip they all had on identical woollen pom-pom hats in blue and green, knitted by parents, so that our school would be easily identified amongst the other two thousand schoolkids who were at Butlin's last week.

We haven't heard the full sagas yet, but they will be to come. She just caught sight of Jake, before he went off to his party. I like your grey jeans, Jake, are they new? Just a week away, but you can miss so much.

Prodigal Daughter

We had a surprise visitor last week. I got this phone call, saying could I pick her up and give her a bed, the sort of phone call which used to drive me round the bend. For years, we seemed to get them on the hour. Living in London, you are at the mercy of everyone in your whole life you have ever met, or to whom you might be remotely related, who happens not to live in London.

I did it myself of course, and I am still very grateful to Squire Barraclough for giving me room on his settee in Archway for two weeks in 1958. I wonder where he is now. I wonder what that settee is doing. I wonder if I've spelled his name right.

I went downstairs to tell my wife, heh up, lass, get kettle on, look sharp, by the right, think on. I've promised someone they can sleep in our spare room. I'm on the way to pick them up. She's homeless, poor thing. Could be just one night. Could be for ever. You have got tea-bags in the house? Right, see you later.

And I ran out of the front door and into my car and went zoom, zoom, as she stood there with steam coming out of her ears.

'I've got my feminist book to finish and it's all right for you but I have other things to do and you might have consulted me and anyway who is it?'

I zoomed back again, a few yards, and wound down the window.

'It's Caitlin,' I said. 'Remember her?'

I went off chortling into the night, though it was actually two in the afternoon on a very rainy, very freezing, so-called

spring afternoon but I like the look of the words, 'chortling into the night'. Has an archaic ring, pre-war school stories, what.

Caitlin's squat is nearer her art college than we are and she is nineteen and got her own life to lead. So it goes. Depending on whom I'm telling, I can make it sound like the pits or gosh what fun, so you think she must be in the Lady Di set at least in some little bijou flat in Kensington. She does pay rent. It is official.

Zoom zoom. I had been to it once before, helping her move in, but it was dark, definitely night on that occasion, and I didn't manage to have a nose around. Now I was looking forward to casing the joint, or joining the cases. Her worldly possessions were in a line of black plastic bags, waiting in the hall for me to collect. There was also a hatstand, a plastic chrysanthemum, a kite, a broken mirror and an enormous portfolio which I could hardly carry into the car. She must have been working hard.

It was obviously a condemned house, with the walls bare, holes in the ceilings, all bannisters removed, junk in corners, no water or electricity, gosh, this really is fun, but I said nothing, not wanting to put my foot in anything and trip over. I do feel sorry for many of these poor homeless people. However can they go back to their lovely warm middle-class homes when they've tasted the good life.

Then she took me upstairs to the room she has been using as a studio. I admit that has been one definite advantage. We don't have such a room here, nothing quite as large and light and spacious. We *could* create one, of course. All it means is taking the windows out, knock a few walls down, rip a few floors up, but I don't think her mother would approve. She's frightfully fussy that way.

There seemed to be no one else around, unless they were hiding. One by one, all the people have moved out, into different accommodation provided by the Council. Caitlin and her boyfriend are the last survivors. Now, at last, even they have to get out.

But she had some very good news, hence her excitement. In this day and age it's like winning the Pools, being lucky

in the draw for the Nobel Prize, your number coming up to be interviewed on *Desert Island Discs*, all those things that we mortals only ever dream about. Yup. It has happened. She is moving into a council flat. Open the champagne, folks.

I have to go along with all this delight, not wanting to be a spoil-sport, but inwardly I am shaking my head and thinking what has it all come to, Hunt. You struggle and work hard to become a property-owning capitalist, a fully paid-up member of the middle classes, someone Mrs Thatcher can be proud of as she goes about the planet bestowing her blessings, then this happens.

I know I ought to be thrilled, but old prejudices die hard. They tell me things have changed out there, status symbols have altered, and it is true that I do know lots of teachers and social workers and artists and other respectables who now live in council property, but gee whiz and by the left and who'd have thunk it. Council house to council house, in just two generations.

At Caitlin's age, which is nineteen, my ambition in life was to get out of our council house. Now the world's ambition is to get into a council house. Should I have my head felt or send her on a brain-washing week-end with Giddy and Giddy, Roy Brooks, Knight, Frank and Rutley, Jackson Stops and Starts.

It is only a temporary thing, of course, before she goes off to university in the autumn. She is part of a housing co-op and is not depriving some poor homeless family. There is not exactly a rush any more for those sort of decaying monster council blocks around King's Cross for reasons we need not go into and really I don't want to describe it at all. The sight of the vandalised lift will give me nightmares for weeks.

It is good for the young to get away and do whatever the young do and terribly good for the middle-aged to be left in peace with their hot-water bottles and two pairs of spectacles, supping their cocoa and trying to find *Kaleidoscope* on Radio 4 knowing that no one has been interfering with their rituals and turned the stupid knob to Capital. But into a high rise council flat?

Hobby Horses

Jake and my wife are not talking at the moment. Well, it's the season. Every year at this time, these things come round, the same old problems, same old decisions to be made, same old arguments and agonising. We were spared the Big One last year but God, the year before, it went on for ages.

No, it's not about whether we should have the central heating boiler serviced this time or miss a year and hope to save some money, though of course if we do it'll go wrong. Nor is it hunt-the-tortoise time. Any moment now it will disappear and we'll never know whether it's dropped dead on us or gone off early to hibernate.

The number one topic of the moment, which it must be in thousands of homes just now, is college entrance. Jake has been twitting on about his UCCA stuff and university entrance forms and how to permutate five from any fifty. Now that he has started the Upper Sixth, it's real decision time.

Upper Sixth. God, it seems only yesterday he was trotting off in his clean blazer, polished face, new shoes, leather briefcase, no I must have made that up. It was in the Victorian daze that they had archaic things like briefcases and satchels. Modern schoolchildren have all the advantages of the latest technology when it comes to carrying their belongings to school. They're called plastic carrier bags.

Jake is actually very well organised and has read all the university handbooks and brochures and made several visits already and decided the sort of offers they might make. Caitlin, two years ago, got bored very quickly and would only pick two, instead of the five which Uncle Ucca allows

you. Luckily she got into one of those of her choice and after a year on a foundation art course, she starts university on October 2nd. Lucky University.

The bit that has upset my wife seems pretty trivial to me. On one of these application forms which Jake is currently dog-earing and cat-licking, he has got to fill in his Hobbies and Interests. Nothing unusual about that. But my wife picked it up and found that Jake had put down three hobbies—Cycling, Spaghetti Eating and Harmonica Playing.

Oh Jake, you can't put that. All you do is cycle half a mile down the road every Saturday to Chalk Farm to do your week-end job as a waiter. Then you come back again. Apart from that, you don't actually *cycle* anywhere. What if the admissions tutor picks on it in the interview and asks you how many races you've won and were you in the Tour de France this year?

Jake just smiled. He thinks it's quite funny. I suppose it is slightly more interesting than Reading. Everybody in every Sixth Form puts down reading on their university application forms. I suppose the most boring of all is walking. You might just as well put breathing.

His spaghetti eating *is* quite funny, though I doubt if the admissions people will think so. At the school camp this summer, which was for First Years but Jake went to help out, he was first in a spaghetti competition. He's rather proud of it. Several kids at school have come up to him since to ask about it. There was this race, see, to get through a bowl of spaghetti in the fastest time. Several masters took part, as well as First Years and Sixth Formers, and our Jake won. What a hero. Gee, Jake, tell me again how you did it.

But not on your university entrance forms, Jake. Be sensible. They haven't much sense of humour, these university people.

As for the harmonica playing, that is just dopey. He can't play for toffee, though he'll thump me for saying so. But *he* thinks he can. When he's in a soulful mood, he puts his records on in his room and plays along with them. On his

bleeding harmonica. You can hear cats howling all over the neighbourhood.

It is a problem, though, having to have Hobbies and Interests. I am surrounded by them and I now wish I didn't have so many. My room is piled high with all my collections of stamps and books and postcards and autographs and newspapers and memorabilia and other junk which is all terribly precious and must not be touched by anyone. Including me. I buy the stuff, then leave it there.

I put football down as my hobby when I was Jake's age, applying to Durham. I knew it wasn't smart or intellectual, but having kept records of all Scotland's matches back to 1936, and acquired dozens of scrapbooks still soggy with pink and green coloured newspaper photographs of my heroes, I was ready for any question, should the subject come up.

In the actual interview, all this superior being asked me, sitting on his chaise-longue, showing no interest in me at all, or in any of the stuff I'd written on my application form, was which operas I had seen. Coming from Carlisle, I found that very easy to answer.

When I left Durham, trying hard to get a job, I was much more concerned to have some respectable sounding hobbies and interests to put on my forms. I remember the week before the end of the term joining the Fine Art Society, whatever that was, and being made secretary. That filled up a lot of space. Pity it didn't impress the Shell interviewing board when I was called before them in Newcastle. Turned down flat.

Should you tell the truth about Hobbies? Do they care? Does anyone actually read that section? They keep shoving it on, so there must be some reason. At seventeen and eighteen, you look around and see other people with apparently all-consuming interests in life and you feel rather jealous and out of it. You have to think up some, or you feel naked, an empty, boring person. But if you put the wrong ones, you can sound a jerk or a pseud or a wet.

When Caitlin was filling in the same forms, two years ago, my wife was equally scathing when she found that Caitlin

had only put down one hobby—Jumble Sales. This was perfectly true. It was by far her number one interest at the time, providing her with endless excitement and rubbish. God, that reminds me, if she doesn't clear that side passage out by October 2nd, I'm burning everything.

My wife was not against her telling the truth, one must never encourage one's children not to do that, tut tut, but she did try to suggest that Caitlin might use rather different words. 'Curio Collecting.' That would sound slightly more upmarket.

Caitlin got her own back on me when she was filling in those forms. I think I'd been trying to press her to apply to Durham, and generally giving helpful hints, oh no, I couldn't possibly have been interfering, and she said certainly not. I don't want to go to anywhere you went.

You always have a section in these entrance forms where you fill in the name of your parent or guardian. Caitlin refused to put down my name anywhere. Instead, she put her mother's name. But Caitlin, I said, they'll think you're an orphan or from a one-parent family or we're divorced. It's just routine. When they say 'parent', you always put in your Dad's name. That's how nature intended it. But she wouldn't change the entry.

Then of course there's Occupation. I remember that causing a lot of consternation when I was at school. All the lads whose dads were fitters insisted on putting down Engineer. What cheats. Or postmen came out as civil servants. My dad was a clerk, but I always made him spell out exactly what grade he was—Higher Executive Officer was the highest he reached—as it looked much more important.

Jake is now threatening to get his own back on my wife for being so critical about his hobbies. You know how busy she always is, writing books, doing reviews, little broadcasts, generally organising the literary world. He says he's going to put her occupation down as 'Housewife'.

Hello Campus

Today was a watershed day. A small hurdle for UCCA but a giant leap forward for our family. Today was the day, mark it well, Hunt, try to write clearly in your diary, that your first-born started university.

We took her there in the car, me and the old trout, plus another girl from Caitlin's school who was starting at the same place, plus her Dad. We have now just got back and my headache is worser than it was when we started. All day I have felt rotten. Withdrawal symptoms, you will say, and you will be wrong. Nothing has given me greater pleasure for a long time.

First of all, we have spent nothing on her school education, so I managed a few smug smiles to myself as we drove out of London. Imagine having sent your child to Dartington, then have him or her or it turn out just like any other comprehensively educated child of the Eighties. All that money, I wouldn't have been able to bear it.

What have I done with the money I haven't spent? Search me. OK, I have some nice stamps and we do have good hols and Augustus Barnett must have had a fortune from us and I have bought you that new Miele, sorry, us the new Miele, I know, I know, it's for the house, it just slipped out.

If you spend £5,000 a year on a child's education for ten years, which is apparently what some dopey parents do, think how much the same money would make on a simple insurance policy. At the age of nineteen, let me see, you could present them with a cheque for £100,000, tax free, and say, 'Here you are, off you go, have fun, don't upset the horses and give us a ring at Christmas, one of these

decades.' With that sort of money, you wouldn't need O-levels, never mind a posh accent.

I was also pleased, as we drove through the London suburbs, going very slowly 'cos I couldn't see a thing out of the back with the trunk and all the boxes, to think that Caitlin was actually going to start university. You know what it's like when they insist on taking their ridiculous Year Off. Caitlin did do something useful, but I wondered all the time if she might change her mind.

The lovely trunk in the back of the car, all brown and shiny, was not Caitlin's but her friend's. Caitlin has decided to go through life with the minimum of possessions, don't you know. Who needs all these materialistic things. She came out of the council flat where she has spent most of the summer with a few black plastic sacks, then some friends threw a cushion down from the top floor, and we were jolly well orf.

Her dear mama had washed a few of her things, then ironed them beautifully, but not too beautifully, so she would still recognise them. My contribution towards the first day has been to stay up all last night screaming. That was why I started and ended the day with such a headache.

Caitlin rang two days ago to say she needed her passport or birth certificate, otherwise she couldn't start. Something to do with Enrolment or getting the keys of her room, anyway, it was vital, you *had* to have them. Oh God, I turned the whole house upside down and failed to find her passport. She had it last, I knew that, oh yes you did, but I had to try searching for it before I could blame her. She has now decided it must be in the rubble of that squat she was in earlier this summer, the one the Council knocked down.

I hate looking for things. It makes me so bad tempered. Normally, I'm ever so easy-going, honest, ask anyone, but when I lose something and fail to find it, I see so many other things in chaos, stuff I'd failed to find on previous searches, vital documents I know I should put away more safely, then my mind goes blank and I can't see or think straight and I just rant and rave and rush round the house blaming everyone. Who's stolen it. That's my favourite.

Now, Hunt, just sit down quietly and think clearly about where you last had it, says my wife, ever so sensibly, and that makes me froth and foam even more. In the case of the birth certificate I knew it was all my fault. I have a special folder for all certificates and no one, but no one, is ever allowed to touch them. That's it. It's either you lot, or burglars. No one leave the planet.

I had every drawer in the whole house emptied, before I found it. At the *back* of the drawer I had put it in. I must have overfilled the drawer and forced it shut at some time and the folder had slipped down behind, hidden from view. Oh God. I went to bed, very late, still in a temper, and hardly slept.

We found the campus, despite having forgotten to bring a map, and eventually located the rooms which Caitlin and her friend had been allocated. There was a good atmosphere, friendly and welcoming, with lots of older students detailed to help the newcomers. Most of the new students seemed to have come with their parents and there was a great deal of carting and carrying boxes up and down. Then back again as we all got lost.

Caitlin's room looked quite nice, not much space but an attractive shape and well designed. She's in a unit with twelve students, male and female, and they share the same cooking facilities. Gosh, what fun. We didn't stay long. No one wants their aged parents hanging around. I feel eighteen and I'm convinced I look no more than nineteen, but for some reason the rest of the world doesn't think so. I can never understand this.

The first weeks in a new institution are always very strange, so we said wisely, nodding our aged heads, as we drove into the town then had a long walk along the sea. There you are, a location clue, but that's the last one. Must give Caitlin some privacy. At last.

We tried to remember our own first days as students. I went on the train from Carlisle to Durham with three other blokes from school. No parents came with us. Parents didn't have cars in those days. And they were *always* very, very, very old.

I can remember the same confusion about trunks and how to get them to the room, wherever that was. I can remember the smell of the Castle, rather sweaty I thought, soapy and moist. Some of the same smells came back today, down all the years.

I can remember that the older students looked so ancient, such men of the world, so mature and worldly, which of course many of them were. This was 1954 and many had done National Service first. I was one of the callow eighteen-year-olds, straight from school. Still am.

My wife went from Carlisle to Oxford all by herself on a train which took for ever and she arrived late and went straight to bed, then woke up having decided to get out of college as soon as possible. She hated being cooped up with girls all her own age inside a building with endless regulations, and was determined to have a flat of her own. Which she did.

On my second day, I rushed out to buy a college blazer, a college tie, a college scarf and a gown. I would have bought a duffle-coat, the other essential of student life in the Fifties, but I'd run out of money. Sounds like the 1850s, doesn't it. Remember how people of the opposite s–x had to be out of the rooms by seven o'clock? Standards and attitudes and conditions of student life have changed so much in thirty years. I'm sure Caitlin will enjoy it. She has got her black plastic sacks.

Comprehensive Cover

We've been looking at schools. No, not to buy one, though quite a few are ripe for development with some fine playing-fields and bits of greenery, and would fetch a fortune, if ever schools went out of fashion. Not much chance. I feel that schools are with us for quite some time. Keeps them off the streets. What would those teachers do without them.

It's all the emotion that keeps them going, all this passionate concentration and deliberation which parents put into the Great God Education. Then the rows and scenes to come. There's always some parent in our area who hasn't got the school of their choice and refuses to send the poor kid to any other school and they're down at the education offices every day, or camping on the pavement outside the school they do want, or chaining themselves to railings.

Now that Flora is aged eleven and a few days, we must put our great minds to the problem of her secondary education. Our Local Authority, which happens to be ILEA, Division 2, has sent us a bumper bundle of possible comprehensive schools, twenty-one in all, just to confuse us. How do those parents straight off the boat ever cope.

The list includes the London Nautical School, whatever that is, though I'm sure Flora would like the uniform, oh no, it's for boys only. Or there's a boarding school out in Suffolk she could go to, Woolverstone Hall, which is where the writer Ian McEwan went. Completely free, I see, for parents living in Inner London. But of course we couldn't part with our little Flora, the last of our lovely

brood. Oh well, two down, only nineteen to wonder and worry about.

We have been through all this process twice already, with Caitlin and Jake, eight and six years ago, so many of the possible schools are household names. But a strange thing has happened in eight years. Those once spoken of with contempt, dismissed as sink schools by the know-alls, are now oversubscribed. Some of the one-time rubbish schools are now so snotty that if you don't put them down as your first choice, then it's no chance, please leave the pavements clear and don't touch those railings.

Three good things have happened during my lifetime in London. No smog. That was amazing. I used to come home in the early Sixties and be unable to find my own street and end up driving on pavements, completely lost. Then the Thames is now clean, the cleanest metropolitan river in the world. Thirdly, we have at last got proper comprehensives. OK, don't scream, I know your little Kevin is down for Eton and Tracey is down for Roedean and you did try the local primary, but it didn't stretch them. What are they, made of rubber or something? Yes, I know you can't bear *your* local comprehensives, have you *seen* them, shocking I agree, and the language, tut, tut.

I try not to argue about education these days, life is too short, but isn't it lovely the way public schools now feel prejudiced *against*. You hear these parents moaning about their Darren and Craig, upon whom thousands have been spent at Westminster, unable to get into Oxbridge because, so they say, Oxbridge is letting in comprehensive kids with much *lower* grades. All true. And it will get better, or worser, depending on your point of view. Hey ho. What a larf.

Yes, we were rather fortunate when it was Caitlin and Jake. Our area was in the throes of changing and the schools which had formerly been grammar schools naturally had the edge. They were everybody's first choice. Nobody then wanted the schools which had been secondary modern schools. There was no Eleven Plus, but we were in agonies waiting to see if they would be sent to their

first choice, which they were. Phew.

With Flora, we have felt no worries at all, as the choices seem equal, even though for the last few weeks some kids in her class have been boasting about their school for next year, ooh horrible, that stinks, that one, come with us Flossie, it's really good, no no, my sister knows the *really* best one.

Round the cocoa, just a quick cup, we decided we would look at only two, the two nearest possible schools to our house. We decided against the one Caitlin went to, excellent though it is, as that means a short bus ride. Why impose travelling on her when there's no need. Jake is at an all-boys, so that's out, though it's mixed at Sixth Form level.

Last Tuesday we went to school A, which is a ten-minute walk away. I've never liked the building, but it was marvellous inside. We were taken round by two very laid back Sixth Formers, a girl and a boy. It didn't matter which classroom I said we would like to look in, he drawled Yeh, why not. Eight years ago, I don't remember being able to walk into any classroom while lessons were going on. I wonder if Eton allows that. There was an air of great excitement and the enthusiasm from the pupils and the staff. In a Maths class, the teacher even stopped to explain to me what SMILE is. Don't ask me what it is, but I was told. I did Old Maths at school.

School B, which we visited on Thursday, is even nearer, in the next street, just three minutes away, and has terrific grounds, but it is much more traditional. It even has a uniform, which worried Flora, but she has been through the rules and realised it's fairly flexible, with several colours and choices, so she'll be able to stun them.

At both schools, all the parents seemed pretty ordinary, brows knitted, worried and harassed looking, while their children turned up as if in some fashion display. Well, the girls did, out to impress their future classmates. During one of those boring addresses which a head gave, droning on in a vast hall, coming out with the usual clichés, I sat behind two girls of Flora's age who spent all the time doing their nails, arranging their hair and fixing their jewellery.

The written stuff they give out tells you so little. All nineteen schools in the handbook have a section called Aims, and they all say much the same. 'To develop the full potential of each child . . . to provide a caring community . . . standards are high . . . a sound general education.' Yawn, yawn.

Having worked out the uniform rules, or lack of them, Flora went straight to the section marked Jewellery in each school's own prospectus. Let's have the right priorities. Then she wanted to inspect their Dance and Music facilities, both very important to her. There seemed to be a better organised orchestra in one school, but the other had better sounding Dance groups. Not a word from Flora so far about learning. Not even a smile.

One school was very violent eight years ago, and the corridors were like jungles, but they have transformed it. The only nasty graffiti we noticed was in the more traditional school, though the teacher taking us round at the time rushed into the classroom ahead of us and sat on top of the worst desk, hiding a particularly juicy bit of modern football slang.

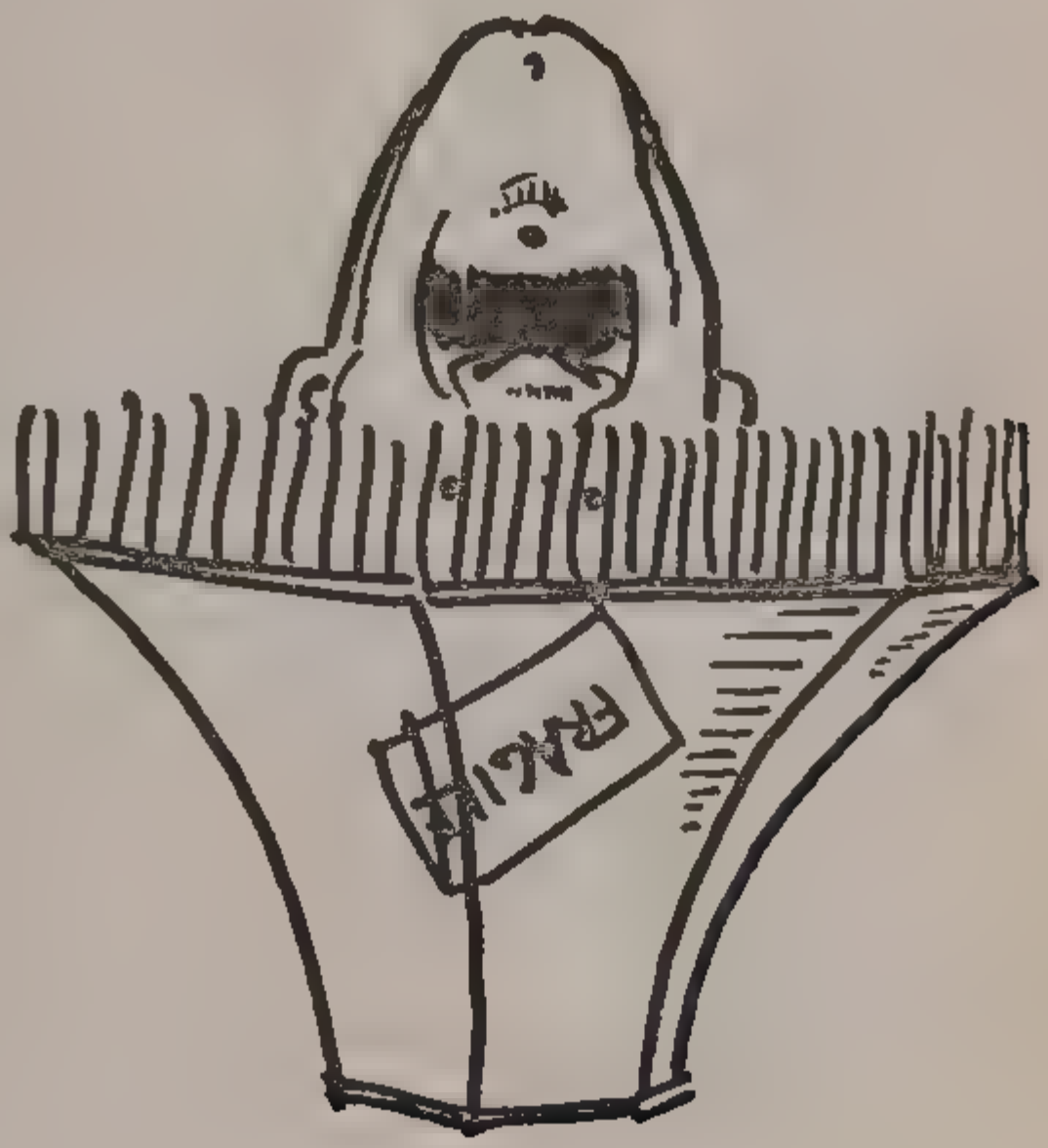
Although we were so relaxed, we experienced parents, with no worries about the possible choices, there were lots of parents making endless notes, asking scores of questions. I met one dad, a bloke who used to play in our Sunday morning football team, who had two private schools on his list, plus four local comprehensives. Poor fellow. He's been at it almost full-time for weeks and will hardly have a spare moment between now and Christmas.

So we came home and tried to take it very seriously, compiling our own list. Do we go for ethos? Let's not. We can't even agree what the word means. Academic work? They both seemed the same. For attractiveness? One definitely has a much prettier setting, with enormous greenery, but are kids aware of such things? It's coming down to nearness in the end, and which one most of her friends from primary school will go to.

Which will suit *Flora* best? Oh God, that is hard. Having been through all those teenage traumas, I can't begin to

imagine that Flora at eleven will be the same person at sixteen. Should we save her from herself, or encourage what we think is in her?

There was one thing to be said for the Eleven Plus. No arguments. That was it. The only thing wrong with parental choice is parental choosing. Pass the pin, Alice.



Flat Rates

We've been playing at students this week-end, not the glamorous bits like throwing eggs at walls and being sick out of windows, surely there must be people out there still doing that, but the more humdrum stuff like carrying endless plastic carriers full of old crockery, old clothes, pots and pans, books, broken lamps, stupid ornaments, silly notices, wondering where on earth all this junk came from, wondering where on earth it will go.

You've guessed. We've been helping Caitlin. All students seem to spend most of their time these days wandering around, trailing their bags and belongings, looking for some place to lie down. Caitlin has had two different dumps, I mean rooms, since she started her student life six months ago.

When I was a student, the state paid everything for me, being so poor, tra la, but it at least gave me freedom and some wealth. I have to pay all Caitlin's maintenance fees, and I'm not moaning, just stating a fact, so I've spent a lot of time trying to get back deposits from landlords. This time I decided to take on a short lease of a small unfurnished flat, which she is going to share with a girl friend.

As landlord, I suggested I would go down first and knock it into shape. Okay, I *insisted*. I don't think Caitlin wanted us anywhere near it, as our standards and styles are not her standards and styles, but me and the old trout and Flora decided we would go down on our own for the week-end and christen her new room. Gosh, what fun.

I had ordered a bed on the phone from Debenhams. I know, it was mad, the last thing Caitlin wanted was a new

bed. She much prefers an old mattress on the floor or something found in a skip, but her mother and I, do note the royal we, wanted her at least to have a proper bed. Everything else could be second-hand. It was really me what did it. Even if I'm just sleeping there for the week-end, I want to be on a proper bed. Everyone else can sleep on the floor. When you get to my age, the old back needs as much support as it can get.

I slept on a bloke's sofa once, for six weeks, when I was young, back in the dark ages before Mr Ortho had invented his Paedic beds, and it was hellish. And as for camping with the Boy Scouts, sleeping on groundsheets, bloody hell, that was agony. I'm surprised I ever grew up to be 5′ 10″. OK, 5′ 9½″.

Rotten Debenhams wouldn't deliver it on Saturday, so I had to go straight to their store the minute we arrived in Brighton to pick it up, then get it in the car to Caitlin's flat and up two flights of stairs. And me with my dodgy knees. But I did it. She's a lucky girl, that Caitlin. All week-end we said that. Good job she didn't hear. She would have said the opposite.

Then we went to buy a second-hand chest of drawers. Yes, I know she would be quite happy hanging her clothes on the floor, as she normally does, but I wanted to get one bit of real furniture, before she fills the whole place with rubbish.

I fancied a pine chest of drawers and we eventually found one—at £300. Ridiculous. We have about four here in London, in each of the bedrooms, and they didn't cost more than £30 each. All right, I know, don't say it, this was twenty years ago.

There was no shortage of places to look as the staple industry of Brighton is antique shops, that's apart from those people running bijou French-style restaurants. In the end, we found a place selling cheap utility stuff, 1950s junk, all fairly nasty but all fairly cheap. I saw this chest of drawers marked £26 and offered the bloke £20 cash, take it or leave it, in my fast London way. 'No chance,' he said, even faster.

I then rose to £22, hard cash, and he said cash is nothing to me. I followed him to a backyard, where there was more stuff lying around, and he went mad, ordering me out. No one was allowed in that backyard. He had two terrified assistants who both looked at me, pityingly.

It was by now late on Saturday afternoon, our only day for shopping, so I was forced to pay what he was asking. My usual principle is that they will always take less. I asked him if I could leave it in his yard while I went and got the car. Parking is hell in Brighton. I have never been to a worser town. Even in the residential districts, you can't park. And the meter maids are fiends. It was going to be very awkward anyway, getting near his shop, as it was in a trafficless lane.

'Look,' he said, as I handed him the full amount, in cash, through clenched fingers, 'will you stop causing problems.'

My wife looked away. If I had been a man, not a London mouse, masquerading as a real man, I would have told him to piss off, keep your rotten chest of drawers. In the film version, I'd definitely do that. Probably even hit him as well. No one messes around with Big Hunt, not when it's me who's landed the job of writing the script.

But I was tired and fed up and hoping that my wife had not heard the full extent of his bad temper and rudeness. So I slunk off, humping the stupid chest myself. Oh, she's a lucky girl, that Caitlin.

Back in the flat, I had to stop my wife rushing around and doing her Mrs Tittlemouse tricks. There were at least ten other vital jobs to be done, but she had thrown herself at the kitchen wall and pulled off sixty-two brown vinyl tiles. They were doing no one any harm. Caitlin might have loved them, by the very fact of being so gross.

All week-end I had to stop her rearranging things. She even tried to get me to move the kitchen, the actual sink unit, because it offended her. She was longing to take over and do it her way. She's so lucky, that Caitlin. Wish we all had a new flat to play with.

We then had to go round Brighton collecting bits of

Caitlin's stuff which she had left in various people's flats and rooms. We were horrified by one place in Kemptown, the supposedly posh part, so it looked from the outside, though I think every street in Brighton looks interesting. She's so lucky, etc, imagine having three years in such, etc.

Anyway, we had to go into this communal kitchen to try and find some of her plates, such as those rather nice blue ones her dear mother had given her last term, and that non-stick pan I had bought in a sale at Christmas, but we had to give up in the end. Every utensil in this kitchen was covered in congealed food. Some of the mould must have dated back to Alexander Fleming.

We met another couple of parents in the house, bringing food parcels for their precious offspring, and we had a good moan together, oh you know, you bring them up the right way, give them bedtime stories about Brillo Pads, introduce them to Squeezy at an early age, tell them inspiring stories about Mr Hoover's inventions, point out that that funny thing is called a tap, turn it on and you'll be quite surprised, but why bother, life is too short.

But we did get Caitlin's new room into some sort of order, all the bags and bits of furniture gathered and arranged, and we settled down for the evening, we three in Hippodrome, not working for the BBC. Do you remember that radio show? I thought I hadn't. God, it must have been forty years ago. I'm far too young to remember it.

That evening was the strangest part of the week-end. These days, in our middle-class, middle-aged, London home, we have space, room to live and breathe, which is what social scientists say we all need. I can always escape to my own work room or the upstairs sitting-room.

But in Caitlin's one room there was Flora watching TV and playing her Michael Jackson tapes, my wife trying to read, and I was trying to get *Sports Report* on a bashed-up radio. We had a meal, sat around, chatted, then we all went to bed, all in the same room. Yes, I know it's how most of the world lives. It's how I used to live, in my childhood. Doing homework at the dining-table with

ITMA on and the clothes drying in front of the fire and people shouting at each other to close the door.

Perhaps I don't want to be a student again after all. I couldn't put up with living such an inconvenient, communal, one-room life. We're so lucky, we parents of Caitlin's.

All Party Risk

Jake is eighteen tomorrow. What on earth am I going to get him. He went off to school this morning quite unperturbed about my worries, smiling to himself, the way they do at that age, and then he came straight back again. School's closed. He'd forgotten.

For the third day this week all our local schools have been on strike, which means that Jake and Flora have been at home. What are they playing at, these teachers. I've managed to struggle on somehow with the miners' strike, closing my eyes and hoping it will never affect me, but the teachers' strike has got me where it hurts. Hunt, so she shouts from downstairs, I'm working, so if Flora wants anything, *you* will have to be in charge. As if I haven't enough problems.

Yes, it is true that for eighteen years I have known that Jake would be eighteen tomorrow, so I should have prepared myself. But you know what happens, things crop up, decades come along, dramas intervene, taps need new washers, and you suddenly wake up and blow me, it's tomorrow.

All I've got for him so far is a balloon which says Eighteen Today. Yes, I do spoil them.

I happened to be passing this shop in Hampstead when I saw these balloons, so I rushed in, thinking that will give me something, bound to be cheap, I mean how amusing. They had them with all the years up to Twenty-One Today. But that was all. I also wanted to buy one which said Forty-Six Today, but they didn't have any. Sorry, we only go up to Twenty-One. What a swiz.

I wanted a balloon saying Forty-Six Today because that will be my wife's age, the day after tomorrow. I know. Haven't I been lumbered. Every year I have Jake's birthday to agonise over, followed the next day by my wife's. You would have thought they could have talked things over and spread things out a bit.

Tomorrow, I can think about tomorrow's concerns. Today, I'll just concentrate my mind on Jake. Now, would he like one of my old suits? Would *anyone* like one of my old suits? Hmm. That didn't get me very far.

Flora has just come into my room. My wife has at least done the decent thing and organised a morning's activity for Flora. She does have good ideas, my wife. Wish I had good ideas, apart from that balloon. She had suggested that Flora and her friend Sarah make our lunch today, all on their own, thinking of the menu, shopping, cooking and serving it. They are having the run of the kitchen and have got to come to me for the money, once they have decided on the menu.

It looks like a £10 job, judging by their shopping list. Double Cream, Basil, Bacon, Four Oranges, Ice Cream, Tuna Fish. What on earth can they be making. By the way Flora, I said as she left, clutching the tenner, when you're in George the Greek's see if there's anything for Jake, you know, my petal, for his birthday, about a fiver, I dunno, no, not pittas, he is eighteen.

I can't remember my eighteenth birthday, I must have been there, but in those days eighteen didn't seem to matter. Most of us were still at primary school at that age, at least mentally. Flora is so grown up at eleven I honestly do think, now and again, when Jake is chuntering on about A-levels, that she must hurry and get her UCCA forms filled in, or has she already sent them off?

I do remember being twenty-one. I had a do, a little intimate dinner party at the Central Hotel, Carlisle. I'm sure they still talk about it. I invited six friends, including my wife, then my best friend, she still is, I'll rephrase that later. I haven't got time to worry about such things with Jake's birthday looming.

Anyway, I paid for this little dinner party, all by myself, having saved up the money from my holiday job as a bus conductor on the Ribble, but throughout the whole meal I was in a panic that I wouldn't have enough to pay for it. I also wore a bow tie. God, that just came back to me. I've never worn a bow tie from that day to this.

Jake has been going to eighteenth birthday parties for months, some of them very grand, but when we suggested one for him, he said no fanks. Oh Jake, you've been going to all these parties, taking all this hospitality, especially from all those lovely girls and their parents, why don't you let your mummy organise something rather nice for you, hmm, knife and fork, tablecloth, four courses, the full treatment, Hunt can buttle, Flora can be a waitress? Get lost.

Jake has not had a birthday party since he was nine. Isn't it strange. Caitlin had one every year of her school life, and Flora has so far. Is it a female thing? Come on, don't tell me girls have simply been brainwashed all these years, conditioned into loving parties.

Since he was nine, Jake has always refused parties, though his nine-year-old party was pretty momentous. Jake's body was so convulsed and his face was so scarlet we were sure he was a gonner.

He is talking at present, but only talking mind you, nothing is settled, about having a joint party after A-levels with two other people from his class, but not in this house. I am quite relieved. He estimates if he did have a party, and he's not promising, then he couldn't invite under eighty people, so they're thinking of hiring a local hall. I did pick up the phone yesterday and a voice said bouncers, what about bouncers, do you want any, but I hung up, not wanting to eavesdrop on Jake's private calls. You never know what you might hear.

That will give him something to look forward to after A-levels. Have you noticed the weather improving. Once those Os and As start, then it will be heat-wave time. You mark my words.

I could buy him a watch. That would be useful in his exams. You're supposed to buy long-lasting presents for

important birthdays. Jake goes through life watchless, just like my wife. I don't know how they can manage. It's like going around half-naked. Caitlin doesn't wear a watch either. What foony people.

A ring? God, no. I am a ringless person. I don't want to encourage that sort of thing. It will be monogrammed hankies next. Perhaps a season ticket for Spurs for next year? We don't know what he'll be doing or where he'll be next year. Nor Spurs. They could get demoted. He has been talking about a motor-bike, or a scooter thing, but I'm not encouraging that either. He can buy his own. He's very rich, as he's saved up all his earnings from his Saturday job.

I could get him a few shares, an interesting speculation, or some premium bonds, but it's a bit soft, giving money or financial presents on birthdays. My wife would never forgive me. She believes birthday presents should be carefully thought out to suit the person. People who give money, so she says, are pathetic, showing no imagination. Caitlin went through her teens saying money, money, that's all I want, but she had to smile and say, thank you Mummy for the very thoughtful present.

I can hear Flora in the kitchen now. The smells are good. I bet she hasn't opened the window and the whole room will be steamed up. I hope she doesn't want any help. I gave up cooking after I had mastered toast. There was somehow no challenge any more.

I've got it. When they've done the lunch, I'll send Flora back to the shop to get stuff to make Jake a special birthday cake. I dunno what stuff. Stuff you make cake with. That will keep Flora and Sarah occupied this afternoon as well.

So that's not bad, a birthday cake *and* a special balloon. I'm quite looking forward to tomorrow. Yes I know my two little offerings will not be much, but what I'm really looking forward to is finding out what my wife has bought me to give Jake. It's bound to be something good and imaginative and just what he's wanted, and I'll smile smugly, having been so clever.

She's done that for eighteen years, why change the system now. We all know that women love birthdays.

Driving Ambition

I'm teaching Flora to drive. What kept her, I hear you say. She's already eleven years old, surely she can drive by now. Very funny.

No, really, she is seriously learning to drive and I am teaching her. It began about a year ago, on holiday in the Lake District, when she asked to take the controls up this little private lonning, or path I suppose you'd call it, for those people who've never been north of Kendal.

I have an automatic car, a Ford Granada, so it's quite easy to drive. If I can manage it, anybody can manage it. Well, nearly anybody. My wife is a non-driving person. I did try to teach her, about ten years ago, but we had words and she got out of the car rather suddenly. It was moving at the time, and she was supposed to be in control, but she just opened the door, swore at me, and got out, leaving me to stop it running into a river.

I have a friend who was teaching his wife to drive and they came to this big roundabout and she said which way, left or right, and he said straight on. So straight on she went, up the kerb and straight over the Corporation's prize flower garden. Moral, learn the language before you learn the driving.

I had vowed to teach nobody nothing no more, neither my wife nor the children. All you get is abuse or calluses on your knuckles. God, the years I spent running behind Caitlin when she was learning to ride a bike, holding on to the back of the seat to stop her falling off, while she screamed and said don't leave go, don't leave go. There's nothing more awkward than running behind a bike, trying

to hold on to it. I bet that's how my dodgy knees started. Sorry, just slipped out. Yup, feeling very fit today, thanks for asking.

But Flora and I haven't fallen out yet. She does what she's told. No teacher can ask for more than that, but I suppose at eleven most kids are fairly biddable. She's just so thrilled to sit behind a driving wheel that she's content to let me boss her around. My wife could learn a lot from Flora.

Caitlin always was willing, and would grit her teeth and try hard, even when it was something for which she had no natural ability. I'm talking about the Child Caitlin, up to, say, the age of fourteen. After that, well, things were never the same again. You know what it's like with teenagers. Can't tell them anything. But when she was young my wife taught her to swim and she practised hard and had a trific style. It's my wife's only accomplishment of that sort, swimming, and there's a legend in the family that she once swam for Cumberland and Westmorland. I wonder if she ever got there.

Jake was always hell and would refuse any help or tuition or even advice. He *looked* like a swimmer, which he believed was enough, so he'd throw himself in and wildly wave his arms about. Never got anywhere, except into a frenzy. Now it's too late, of course. He just thrashes about in the water. There you are Jake, if only you'd listened to your Mummy and Daddy, or gone to those lessons when we told you, you could have been huge by now. Don't care, so he says. Anyway, I'm going to be a cyclist.

He wears a racing cyclist's shirt, to which he is devoted, and we hate the sight of it, but that's about all. I don't think he's been on his old push-bike for months now, but when people ask him what he's going to do in life, he still says a professional cyclist. 'After my A-levels,' he says, 'I'm shaving my legs.'

This has him convulsed. Listen, son. I make the jokes in this house. Perhaps it's not a joke.

He was worst of all when learning to read. He was convinced he didn't have to be taught that either. Caitlin and Flora were so keen and eager and willing to learn. It

was me that used to tire first, well no wonder, having to listen to them struggling through that stupid *Janet and John.* I suppose they must be grandparents by now, old Janet and John. Modern primaries probably use computers or videos for all teaching.

In the end, we discovered an excellent way of teaching Jake to read. I pass it on for what it's worth. You might use it some time. It's called Hitting Them. Have you tried that? Just a clip round the ear'ole when they say 'sboring, I don't want to read no book. It did work with Jake, I used to bash him on the head with his reading book till he got to the end of the page. I'm amazed he ever grew as tall as he is, but it did work. That'll be ten guineas.

Now look at him, reading *and* writing and joined up handwriting, after a fashion. He's halfway through his A-levels, as I write. I think it's History tomorrow.

Over supper this evening we were talking round the table, as one does, about the origins of the First World War, driving Flora mad. For four years, all she has had to listen to at meal times is talk about O- and A-levels. Poor lass. No wonder she takes her escape by driving my Granada. She deserves it.

Anyway, Jake was talking about Archduke Ferdinand and Flora asked him who he was. Jake explained he was Heir to the Phone of this little country. Flora thought he said that, I was sure he said that, and so was my wife. All our children speak with what we consider to be Cockney accents, and you know how all Londoners strangle the Queen's English, while we speak of course with perfect Northern pronunciation. We are always accusing Jake of saying Fink and Fanks, but Heir to the Phone, that was the best he's ever come out with. Must have been a small country, said Flora, if he was Heir to the Phone. Jake refused to explain any further, if we were just going to mock.

How about Railways then, I said, I'll ask you some question on Railways, that's bound to come up in your Nineteenth-Century English paper. I started my set lecture on what a wonderful genius George Stephenson was, but he wouldn't listen.

'They won't ask *that*.' It's about all Jake ever says, if you even attempt to tell him anything you happen to know a little something about. Me and the Old Wrinkly have been on this planet a lot longer than him and we both did History at University, OK it was a long time ago and OK there was a lot less history to learn in those days, but we do pride ourselves on having picked up a few tit-bits which we are perfectly willing to pass on. But does he want to hear, does he heckers.

I don't know how these sporting children manage, the ones who get taught by their parents, such as Sebastian Coe and Sharron Davies. How did they survive all the rows and temper tantrums, the laziness and contrariness. Hitting them, perhaps. Get in that water, back on the track, or I'll thump you again with this rolled up, soggy copy of *Janet and John*.

But Flora is coming on a treat. She can even do three-point turns. I have high hopes she could make Le Mans. Over this last year she's done ever so well, on this private lonning, but at half term in the Lake District I decided to show her off to her grandad, Arthur, who is aged eighty-four this year.

It came out in passing that I was teaching Flora to drive, and we thought he would be against it. He's a funny bloke. You can never anticipate what will make him shake his head and go tut tut, you shouldn't allow that, ooof. He went tut tut when we allowed Caitlin to go to Geneva with her friends at fourteen, yet encouraged her to dye her hair purple.

He was shocked when he heard Flora had climbed Helvellyn at the age of six ('very bad for the heart') but he approved of her having her ears pierced at seven.

But he laughed aloud at the idea of me teaching Flora to drive and said yes, he'd love to see it, so we drove miles across Cumberland to a disused aerodrome at Kirkbride, a place we remembered from our childhood. It was still disused, but it took me some time to find a gate in to it. It was obviously now owned by a local farmer. I eventually found a way in and it was trific. For the first time, Flora had a proper track to drive on, for over half a mile, instead

of the little bumpy lonning. I sat at the back while Arthur sat beside her, urging her to go faster.

It was my wife who didn't think it was at all amusing. We'll get into trouble, she said, if the police catch us and anyway it's obviously someone's land. Don't be silly, woman, I said. When we finally drove out of the old aerodrome, with Flora and Arthur beaming, we found the gate closed and the farmer's wife standing there, arms crossed. I thought about blaming Arthur, hoping they might let an OAP off with a light sentence.

The best method of defence when you are caught in this situation is simple: grovel. So I jumped out and ran up to her and poured out endless apologies, terribly sorry, up visiting from the South, strangers round here, thought it would be OK. Her arms were in fact holding a paint brush and pot as she had arrived to put a quick coat of paint on the gate. She was absolutely charming. No bother. Don't worry. But she warned us to be careful, if we ever do it again. A plane could have landed on us. Turns out a local flying club is now using the airfield.

So that's the next thing. In the summer hols, I plan to teach Flora to do stunt driving. Catch them when they're young, I always say.

On the Levels

We came back from holiday specially early for Jake's A-level results, to be there at that fateful moment which would decide his future, ready to hold his hand and pick up the broken furniture, or be over the moon and open the bottle of Waitrose champagne I have been saving secretly all year.

Most of all, it was vital to be there with him in case his grades were not up to scratch and there would be a mad rush to ring UCCA and UNCLE and any other set of initials which might help him to get a university place.

So we rushed down the M6 on the Wednesday, to be with him on Thursday morning, well in time to open the dreaded envelope. Guess what. Jake wasn't there. The bugger. And we could have had another two days in the Lakes.

Oh yes, he had got back to London OK from his round Europe rail jaunt, goodness the tales to tell, but now there was a note saying he had gone sailing with two friends, somewhere on the south coast, and would be back on Friday. DON'T OPEN THE ENVELOPE, so his note said. Nor had we to go to school and try and find out his results. I dunno. I've been his Dad for eighteen years. That's all you get.

We had arranged the whole summer round being here in the flesh, to be present for the family's last GCEs, well, of the old sort. It will be another five years before Flora's time will come, as she's only eleven, but by then the system will have changed. They're just going to test you on pop song titles and hair-styles in future. Honest. Someone told Flora.

Luckily, I had enough to occupy my mind with when we arrived back on Wednesday. What am I saying. Bloody unlucky. Four weeks away, and the world had collapsed.

Some idiot had over-wound the kitchen clock, when for years I have made it clear that it's a hanging offence for anyone, repeat anyone, and that means any of your boyfriends, Caitlin, even to breathe on that clock. It is so temperamental that if you look at it twice it curls up and stops.

Then the sitting-room ceiling. We have closed our eyes to the cracks for the last ten years, but in just four weeks they had become chasms.

Then, even worser, the rotten washing-machine door wouldn't close. We brought back enough dirty clothes to supply a school jumble, or Caitlin's flat. It's an AEG and we have had it ten years. Oft, of an evening, when things were slack, time hanging loose, we have mused on what single modern invention could one *not* do without. My wife has always said, quick as a flash, her washing-machine.

Her life could go on without the fridge, certainly without the dishwasher, and definitely without the telephone. I have usually hawed and hummed and said the car, I could survive without the car as I hate cars and loathe driving, but I would quite miss the phone. My vintage Olympia electric typewriter, that's what I would miss most. And the radio. All good harmless conversations round the cocoa. You can keep your late-night movies and videos.

I went to bed in a lather. It's always like this, coming home after the summer hols, but this time seemed worse than normal. Oh no. Don't say it's a sign! Would Jake's A-level results be the next thing to go wrong? Or was all the bad luck now over.

There was no letter next morning, which was just as well. In my mind, I had already been working out if my best magnifying glass would work on it, the one I use for my stamps, though not too often as all it does is show me just how many thins there are in my cheap Penny Blacks. Mrs Davies is very good at steaming open envelopes and then sticking them down again, only took years of practice, but Jake would suspect. He always does.

We then discussed, for the millionth time, his possible grades. He had accepted two conditional offers, which is

what everyone does, but they did seem rather high. For his first choice University, to read Modern History, he had to get an A and two Bs, plus a pass at S-level, though Jake's comprehensive is not normally organised for S-levels. For his second choice, to read History and Politics, a course he was coming round to thinking sounded much better anyway, he needed only one B and two Cs. Surely that would not be beyond him?

We had begun to think so, till the lousy *Guardian* did that story about the fact that only 3 per cent can separate an A from a C grade. All the country's A-level students must have had absolute panics on reading that. What a lottery, these exams, what a con, why do we all put up with them. Then another newspaper, *The Sunday Times* I think, said that this year half the students would fail to get the grades needed for their conditional offer. I wonder if AEG need some young, trainee engineers, with reasonable O-levels?

And once again we discussed the interview he had had for his first choice place. He had refused point blank to wear a collar and tie. It would be false, Hunt, it wouldn't be me, I never wear them fings. He also insisted on going off carrying his bits in his Waitrose plastic carrier bag, the one he takes to school, like all the smartest sixth formers.

Yes, the obvious thing happened. The tutor bloke interviewing him asked what he had in his plastic bag. So out came a worn copy of *Asterix*, a copy of *Cycling News* and a history book, thank Gawd for that.

I suppose these tutor people do get desperate for something to ask the nation's youths. At one of Caitlin's university interviews, the bloke was fascinated by the number of bracelets she had on her right arm and wouldn't stop asking about them. All these taxes I have paid all these years to keep these university johnnies going, and that's all they can think of to talk about. From memory, let me see, she had thirty bracelets on that day. OK, even you might have commented.

About midday on Thursday the phone rang and it was a friend of Jake's, bubbling over, full of himself, anxious to talk to Jake. He had been to school, seen his own results

on the board, and was dying to discuss them with Jake. On the board? Jake had assured us no one would hear till the envelopes came on Friday morning, if not later. What the hell is going on? Where is he anyway?

Then another friend rang, who had also seen her results. Each time I managed not to let them tell me what Jake had got, but very soon the whole area would know.

I studied Jake's scrawled note he had left. No clue about where he had gone sailing. No address, phone number. Not even the town. Just the south coast. What a dum-dum.

After a third person had rung, I decided to have a little walk, perhaps near Jake's school, as it's only four minutes away and I have to pass it to get onto the Heath. My wife said no. Flora said don't. Jake had told you *not* to look. It's *his* results, not yours. He should know first.

I went off, making no promises, but honestly, Jake, I couldn't help it. Just as I was passing the school, a girl came out and told me what he had got. I didn't believe it. I had to go into the school and look at the board for myself. Didn't I. Stands to reason.

Dear God. The scenes of human emotion. It brought it right back, all those years at school and university when I strained my eyes each year to see what marks or grades those half-wits had given me, unable even to see them at first, or even find my own name for the tremors throughout my body.

I could hardly bear to see all those nice young eighteen-year-olds standing there shaking. As the newspapers had predicted, half were utterly shattered, many in tears, many frozen to the spot, numb and unable to take it all in. While the other half were immediately elated, struck by instant joy, tremulous with pleasure. Why do they have to go through all that. Either way, the ridiculous flow of adrenalin is unsupportable. I am surprised there were not any heart attacks, though there was a great deal of swearing and shouting and people rushing off in a blind fury, their whole life apparently ruined by a few dots on a large sheet of print-out.

Later that night, Jake rang, off-hand to tell us he would

be back sometime Friday morning, muttering something about having ruined someone's yacht. We let Flora tell him the news. We had decided that someone else would be bound to tell him his results before we did.

Jake got his grades. Even more than he needed, managing two As and a B, plus two S-level passes. What a relief, but was it worth it to see the misery of so many of his friends?

I like to think I deserve a bit of the credit. Oh come on. All those years when he could hardly speak, least not so's anyone could understand him properly, when he jumped on tables and was a monster and wrecked every occasion and ruined our night life for so long and bashed the hell out of the furniture, who was it who got him interested in Spurs? Oh yes, it was his collecting programmes and sitting for hours analysing their league tables that made us realise he might find an interest in life apart from shouting and screaming.

So, that's it till 1989, when Flora will be sitting her first public exams. Of some sort. By then, I hope to have got the washing-machine working and the ceiling done . . .

Up to the Back Teeth

Jake has been in hospital this week. Yes, McLaglan Ward in the Royal Free Hospital, Hampstead, London, England, has had the pleasure of his company. Lucky people. Not often they get such distinguished scholars.

Nothing very serious, of course, though I had better not say that too loud as he thinks it was a major operation which he took terribly seriously, even if some of his friends did not. He made some dopey young medic write down every little detail of his medical history when they came round with the forms.

Turns out Jake has got a v. serious history of diarrhoea, which was news to us. He had the runs in Europe this summer for five days, so you see, Hunt, I had to tell them. Then he insisted on telling them about the v. bad asthma I had as a child. It all counts, Hunt.

He has been having three wisdom-teeth out, a painful enough thing, as anyone who has had it knows, but one which he was able to save up for a relatively convenient time. At this very moment the country's dental wards are probably full of teenagers having them out, now that all their O-levels and A-levels are safely over.

Mrs Davies has also not been 100 per cent this week, cos of her ear. Got it bunged up with showing off her brilliant breast-stroke at the very posh Luz Bay Club in the Algarve. It was probably the sea water which did it. Anyway, she has been deaf in one ear since we came home, so this week I spent a fortune at the chemist's and bought her some drops. I've quite enjoyed putting them in. I could have been a surgeon. People have said I have the fingers.

Despite her sore ear, she spent a whole morning this week writing out a long list of the virtues which a good headmistress needs. It is Flora's first week at her comprehensive and it so happens they've got a new headmistress as well. She has asked for views on what makes a good headmistress, so my wife, in her caring way, got out her best fountain-pen and quickly itemised twelve desirable things. Oh, you know, a headmistress must be inspirational, discreet, humane, fair, calm, principled, all the usual guff. On my list, I said that the only rule for a Good Headmistress is that she must be nice to Flora, but my wife wouldn't let me send it in.

She went off and posted her list, which was really daft, as the school's only four minutes away, and have you seen the price of a second-class stamp now. She happened to mention what she'd done when Flora came home from school—and Flora went wild. It was only the *girls* in her class who had been asked for suggestions. Not parents. My wife had completely misunderstood.

Oh God, we'll have a really rotten name now, won't we, Flora's only been there a week, but we'll be marked down as interfering parents with you sending off your bossy rules for being a Good Headmistress, unsolicited and out of the blue. Real mess you've made of things. What will she think when it suddenly comes through the post.

She quickly wrote an apology and I ran round with it by hand. As second-class post takes about a week, we should be OK. She blames it all on her deaf ear.

I'm fit and well, by the way, thanks for asking. Rather surprising. Counted everything and, at this moment in time, no complaints, squire. Not that I have time to worry about myself, what with ear-aches and the boy scholar's operation on his jaw.

We rang the hospital on Monday morning at midday and a nurse told us he'd had the operation and was fine, fine, in fact he was up and walking about, so we strolled across the Heath feeling very pleased. No matter how simple an operation is, it can also go wrong. Did I tell you about the time I ended up with a thrombosis when all they were doing

was taking out a cartilage? Oh, sorry. I forgot.

He looked absolutely terrible, lying there as if he'd been run over. His face was all swollen and he couldn't speak because of swabs in his mouth. He was spitting blood and moaning that his chest and mouth were in agony. My wife made an excuse and left. She went to the lavatory where she promptly fainted.

Now, it was a very hot day, close and humid, and she has got a poorly ear, but even so, it did seem a little bit excessive.

So I told Jake about our honeymoon. This was in Sardinia in 1960 and I developed a boil on my bottom. Very common on honeymoons, ask anyone. The hotel called a doctor who arrived and got me on the bed. She was an Amazon of a woman and she proceeded to pummel the boil, saying all modern drugs and injections were a waste of time. My wife watched for only a few moments, then there was a crash—and she had fainted on the floor. The doctor left her there. When she came to, the doctor simply said, '*Un peu de courage, madame.*'

Ah well, that's the role of men in life, Jake, I said. We bear all the pain and the women pass out. But he was in no mood for philosophy. Two of his friends arrived at that moment, a girl and boy, calling "Jakey-poo" and even daring to smile when he asked for a pen to write down things as he couldn't talk.

He did eventually manage to grunt a few words and told them the only good thing had been the Pre-med, that was really good, you felt terrific, they should try it some time. 'Why do they give you cold eggs, Jakey?' asked the girl.

That was when things got a bit complicated. Gawd knows how you can miss-hear Pre-med for Cold Egg. As Jake was in agony with his mouth, it took ages to explain, by which time everyone was shrieking, and the sister said we were all making too much noise and should go soon.

Later that evening, I went over on my own and took him Flora's Walkman, which she had kindly agreed to lend him, and her best tape, her Bob Marley.

He seemed physically in better shape, and could talk more

easily, but he was very miserable, having read *Cancer Ward* the night before, waiting for his Pre-med, and he was now thinking of all the really ill people in hospital. I gave him a bottle of Sagres beer and a Sumol, saved from Portugal, just to cheer him up, but he pointed very gravely to a notice above his head. Nil by Mouth. Stupid Hunt.

Jake has always like proper attention when he has been ill, even as a little boy—attention in the sense that he likes due concern from one and all, an audience if nothing else, to hear his latest reports on himself or, if half an hour has passed with nothing new to report, then someone to take his temperature.

Caitlin was always much more stoic when she was young, going off and being very silent, staying quietly in bed, making no demands. But once she began to get slightly better, then she was suddenly up and off, refusing to be sensible or be cossetted any more, deciding to get up straight from her sick-bed and trail to some party miles away.

Jake came out of hospital today, and he appears to be enjoying doing everything by the book. He had arranged to play golf later this week, at least have a go at it for the first time with some friends, but my wife said was it sensible, Jake, just two days out of hospital? He thought hard and said you're right, perhaps I won't. What a sensible lad.

But he is now taking things a bit far. He says he won't have any casserole at dinner tonight, all because he saw my wife putting a spoonful of wine in it. Bad for me, Mum. The doctor said no alcohol while I'm on penicillin. So she threw something at him.

Flora likes treats rather than an audience when she is ill. If I can bring her a Marathon or a Slush Puppy on the hour, then she gets better very quickly. Touch wood, she's had nothing too serious, apart from all the usual childhood stuff. Oh, there was that pneumonia in America in Bicentennial year. What a way to celebrate. She now rather likes to boast about it.

Jake once did have an emergency dash when an abscess suddenly burst on his bottom when he was about ten. For months he had been complaining, wanting to show us where

it hurt, and we all said oh shut up Jake, go away, not at the dinner table, we don't want to see it, thinking it was yet another trivial spot. In my mind he spent the whole of his childhood with a sore bum. But after that emergency rush to hospital, he has never let us forget our cruelty.

So how's the old jaw, Jake, getting better all the time, hmm? He was just about to give me a blow-by-blow reply, when there was a knock at the front door. Two of his friends had sent round an enormous bunch of gladioli. How kind. He was very touched. I wanted to suggest it might be a joke, but I didn't dare.

He now wants me to make him a cup of coffee. I dunno. When you work at home, I sometimes think people take advantage of you. So I'll have to rush. In ten minutes it will be time to put another five drops in the old trout's ear.

Dad and Daughter

I never feel autumn has really started till I go to Spurs for the first time in the new season. I always miss the first few matches, as we're away, but anyway who wants to watch football in August. The hooligans never look the same without shirts on.

The problem was who to take with me. Jake this week started a job and he has to work Saturdays. No consideration at all for my needs and pleasures. He's working full-time in a bookshop till he gets enough money to go abroad. It's his Year Off, don't you know, before University. Wish I could have a year off.

I tried several friends around the street, but John was in bed with his foot strapped up, just had an operation on his Achilles Tendon, and other excuses, and Derek was playing tennis. So should I go on my own? Now I'm grown up, or pretending to be, I should be able to cope. If I leave chalk marks on the ground, I can usually find my own way home.

I hung around the house all morning, wondering what I would decide to do. My lady wife says she always knows what I'll end up doing, when I'm apparently prostrate with indecision, but I never do. So often I surprise myself. By this evening, Hunt, I wonder if you'll have been?

I went out to talk to the tortoise, hoping for clues, some indication of what I should do, but there was no sign of him. Must be hiding already. Summer is a-comin' to an end. I picked up the last handful of rotten, squelchy pears. For twenty years, we've had this lovely pear tree in the back garden which looks marvellous for a few weeks in spring, then we pay for it all summer as the fruit turns overnight

from rock hard to dead soft and we become a host nation for ten million wasps. Next stage, it will be the falling leaves. Yup, the nights are drawing in.

Arthur, my father-in-law, has been saying that the Nights Are Drawing In since June 21. You would have thought at 83¾ he would not be so keen to watch the seasons rushing past, but the weather gives him such pleasure. Living in Carlisle, you don't get too many excitements.

I watched the lunch-time football previews, as I always do, with my bottle of Guinness, but Mrs Davies had let me down completely and there wasn't a crisp in the whole house. I'm quite prepared to eat mouldy ones, which have been at the bottom of the cupboard for decades, but there was not a sausage, not a nibble.

There are poeple in football, half-wits like football league officials, who say that having football on television stops people coming to matches. What rot. It whets or is it wets the appetite. When I do watch on TV, I feel I'm already half there. Come on the lads.

So by sitting there, ah ha, that was a real clue. I must be verging towards going after all. Or was I? Gawd, the suspense.

I'd forgotten I'd said I might join my wife and Flora for lunch at Marine Ices, so when the programme finished, I went off to meet them. That was it. Driving in the complete opposite direction. A decision had been made.

They were surprised to see me, convinced I would have gone off on my own to the match. They'd had a rotten morning shopping. Oh, some stupid argument over shoes with Flora refusing all the sensible ones.

At two o'clock, I looked at my watch and said that's it then, folks, I am obviously not going. Two o'clock is always the deadline to get to Tottenham.

'I'll come with you,' said Flora.

Woosh. Why did I never think of it. What a sexist piglet. We tore home and Flora tore into her track-suit, to keep warm, and I tore into a bottle of duty-free whisky, to fill up my little hip-flask which had a funny, sour smell as I had obviously not cleaned it out since last season. Ah, all

the memories came flooding back.

As usual, I spilled some whisky on the kitchen table as I tried to fill it in a hurry and I had to bend down and slurp it up with my tongue with Flora shouting oh do come on, Hunt, we'll be late. That was what Jake used to shout, every second Saturday from the age of eight till sixteen. Then he started his draggy old Saturday jobs.

We parked in the same Tottenham side street I have parked in since 1958. It's miles from the ground, but it means it's easier to get away. I used to play a game with Jake whereby we guessed what the gate would be, just by how much space I had to park the car. It was pretty tight, so I guessed 31,000. Flora, being a newcomer to all this intellectual stuff, was unable to hazard a guess.

We ran up the High Road, weaving in and out amongst the massed ranks of supporters, all of them still looking straight from a Lowry drawing. Jake, when he was a little boy, used to waddle along, as he was a bit f–t at one time, humming Tot-ing-ham, Tot-ing-ham. He could never get the right pronunciation. Ardilles at least had the excuse that he was a foreigner.

I bought Flora a scarf. Was it bribery? I always made Jake buy his own, all those years ago, but Flora is my last. You have to spoil them. I know she's only eleven, but I already feel at times that that's it. Heads down now till the grandchildren come. She chose a nasty one in vertical strips, give me the good old horizontal stripes at time. And it was £2. Bloodyhell. Then the programme was 50p. Remember when you could watch Carlisle United, have a hot pie and a Bovril, and still have change out of a packet of Woodbines.

A tout offered me two £7 seats for £10 each, but I declined, even though it was only five minutes to kick-off. I'm not that daft. I went to the Ticket Office, just in case, and got almost the last tickets in the family section, £5 for me and £2 for Flora. What a bargain. They've now got a computer thing with whirring machinery which prints the tickets and the girl working it was having trouble, but it eventually spat out two for us.

The seats were in the North Stand, so we had to run like

hell. She was red in the face with all the rushing. It'll be a rotten match now, I said to Flora, but hasn't it been exciting, just getting here.

I could see quite a few people glancing at us. It still is fairly unusual for a Dad and Daughter to go to football matches. I know many dads who would not take any children, boys or girls, under the age of sixteen, because of the crowd violence, which is a great shame. Flora of course is in her first year at Comprehensive now. Doesn't mean to say she'll have a better chance than anyone else, should we get mixed up in a fight, but at least the crowd language will not come as a surprise to her.

We got to our seats two minutes after the game had started, which was bad luck, but from then on, boy, or should I say girl, what a match. It was non-stop excitement and incident and cheering and applauding, that's if you happen to be a Spurs fan. We beat Queen's Park Rangers 5–0. By we, I mean me and Flora. You pays your money, so naturally you are allowed to take some of the credit. Come on you Lilly Whites.

Afterwards we raced to the car and got the radio on just in time for the familiar tune of *Sports Report*—and we heard some even more amazing news. No, not that Princess Di had had a baby boy, imagine breaking into serious things like football to tell us that, have they no sense of priorities. No, they announced that Arsenal got beat and Spurs were top of the League, if only on goal difference. Oh rapture.

You will be able to boast about this day for years, I told Flora, not just on Monday morning at school. Was it Young Kaspar who was told to remember a famous victory? Well, that was one. You are unlikely ever again to see Spurs win 5 nil in a League match.

What an old pessimist I've become, but I thought I'd better not overdo the excitement of that freak match. Wait till it's January and it's freezing cold and the team plays like a load of Wallies and gets beaten in the Cup by Darlington. What I really wanted to say was would you like to come to the next match, Flora, hmmm, my sweet, but I said nothing. Hoping she would.

My wife had baked a cake for our arrival home, not knowing the result, nor yet the boring old Royal baby news, which was all she really wanted to hear about. That used to be Flora's job, all those winters when me and Jake went together. Something nice in the oven for when the Men return.

So have I found a new friend for this new season? Am I to be given a new lease of life?

After tea, she said it had been trific, thank you for taking me, but nothing else yet. I'll have to wait and see. Just take each game as it comes, Brian. The crowd, by the way, was 31,655.

Italian Read

The phone rang at half-past eight this morning, which was rather unusual, it being a Saturday, Flora not going to school. When it rings at that time on a week day, then we know it must be for Flora. Is it dancing or PE today, Flos?

But Flora was still in bed, these twelve-year-old teenagers, so I picked the phone up, my mind miles away, thinking serious thoughts about muesli, should I try some or will I ruin my teeth and jaw for ever. We have home-made stuff, don't you know, but the old trout fills it with half logs and it sticks in the old toothypegs, yes they are still playing up something rotten. I've already stopped having crisps, peanuts and chewing gum, in an attempt to give my jaw as little work as possible, but it now looks as if I'll have to give up muesli. I will soon be reduced to sops at this rate.

'Meester Daveez? Theez eeez Eee-tal-ee calling.'

Then it went peep peep, followed by a lot of other funny noises, and the line seemed to go dead. I thought at first it must be some dopey foreign person ringing up about our advert in the local paper. We're looking for a granny sitter for my Mum, fat chance so far, but then no one seems to want to help oldies these days. All we've had so far is people fresh off the boat ringing up and not being able to say anything when they've got through.

Something about Eee-tal-ee, I said to my lady person in the kitchen, who was shouting at me to know who it was, which is what always happens when people are on the phone. We all shout at each other, saying what to say or what not to say. The person *not* answering is always so bloody clever at knowing exactly what should have been said.

It'll be Jake!

My wife had suddenly rushed through from the kitchen, oh if I don't watch her, she often does this, getting very forward these days.

I'd forgotten all about Jake. He has been away in Florence for three weeks now, studying at the British Institute on a four week course. I have written four long letters to him so far, great letters, full of family chat, plus every football result carefully cut out of the papers, and all we've had from him so far is one post-card. And that was 90 per cent full of the details of his journey getting there. As if we want to know that.

All Jake's journeys, even getting to school, have been dramas, so we knew that going on his own across Europe would turn out to be a saga. He had been given the wrong tickets by the travel agent, the stupid train times were not right, he didn't get a sleeper, nearly lost that, almost missed the other, yawn yawn.

All that me and his dear Mama have been wanting to know is what is it like in Florence. We've heard boring travel stories before. In fact, in my last letter I did him a Multiple Choice Questionnaire. To keep it simple, all he had to do was tick off one answer for each question, then return it, just to keep us happy. Jake always did like exams.

Your Landlady: Is she old/young/nice/not nice/just like your Mama?

Your Bedroom: Is it big/small/cold/hot/full of Italians?

Have you seen: Prince Charles and Lady Di/Sir Harold Acton/Graeme Souness/Rossi/the English Cemetery/nine o'clock in the morning/that old razor I left in the hotel when we were on holiday in Florence last year?

Your Fellow Guests: State their age/sex/home town/class/school/character. Photos will gain extra marks.

In this one post-card we have received so far, he mentioned that there were five other English students in his lodgings, but with no clues to them whatsoever. Call me nosey if you will, but Dear God, I expect a bit more gen than that.

My wife looked worried. If it really was a call from Italy

at this time of the morning, perhaps it was because something was wrong with Jake. He'd fallen off his Vespa, if he'd bought his Vespa, which was one of his daft ideas before he went. It might be a hospital trying to get through. Or the police.

I picked up the phone again and went hello, hello, hello, as one does, while my wife screamed at me for having hung up. Shurrup, I said. What's the Italian for hello? I tried Ee-lo a few times, then suddenly Jake's voice came through, bright as a new-born button.

He was ever so excited, fair panting to tell me his news. He had got a job. And secondly, he probably wouldn't be home for another three months.

My wife was waving her tiny hands in the background, having heard the reference to three months, but not knowing the rest.

Jake had just come that moment from having an interview for a job in a big posh house in Florence, with massive grounds and a swimming pool. In exchange for four hours a day gardening, he is to get free accommodation. Gardening? Our Jakey? He wouldn't know a spade if he met one in his muesli.

The hours I've screamed at him, just to get him to cut the lawn, but I've always failed. I don't think he's ever killed a weed in his life, nor would he recognise one. I did manage to get him to move some paving stones last month, and they're still there, dumped at the precise spot where his mind wandered and any moment Jessica from next door is going to climb over the wall and do herself an injury. He doesn't even *know* what gardening is. He was reading this book not long ago and asked us this hard word he had come across: primrose. Imagine getting to eighteen and not knowing what a primrose is.

On the phone he explained that when he finishes his course in a week at the Institute, he'll then stay on as a gardener, though first of all he is going to Elba for the weekend. Elba? Yes, twenty of them are going to sleep on the beach. My Jakey? Sleep on the beach? What will his Mama think about that. She's already been twitting on about who is doing his

washing and has he really taken enough clothes for four weeks and is he getting enough to eat.

Apparently, only one of my letters has got through so far. What a drag. After all my effort and that v. clever Questionnaire. The post is taking twelve days, so he said I needn't write again for the moment. I started to tell him about Spurs, but he said he knew. You can read the English papers that same day in Florence. Why did I bother.

I asked him about the five other students in his digs, and he said oh yeh, they're all girls, real Sloanes. Many of the girl-students just sit about drinking all day and hardly go to lessons. He said the Italian was coming on well, least he was quite good at understanding, but not the speaking. I said Italians have much the same trouble.

There was then a sort of clicking on the line, and I thought he was putting in more money, but he said no, it was Call Collect. You know, transfer charges, Hunt. Hadn't I understood that when the operator had come through in the first place? It would probably cost £10 a minute. Bloody hell. That's a fortune. Sorry about that, he said, then he started to tell me about his journey to Florence, and I shut him up at once. Probably hurt his feelings. At that price, I'm willing to take the chance.

I didn't spend too long chatting after that, but arranged that his Mama would ring him next Friday, direct at his digs, and he could give us the address of this Palazzo he's going to move into. Then I hung up.

I went over all the details, so nice to have an audience hanging on one's words, but all his Mama wanted to know about was this posh family he's going to live with. I said the woman of the house had just interviewed him that morning. I think he said the husband was French, or something. She looked rather worried. Look dear, you've read too many novels about sensitive young English boys being taken up by mysterious Italian contessas. He is eighteen. Nineteen next month. Oh no, we'll now miss his birthday, what a shame.

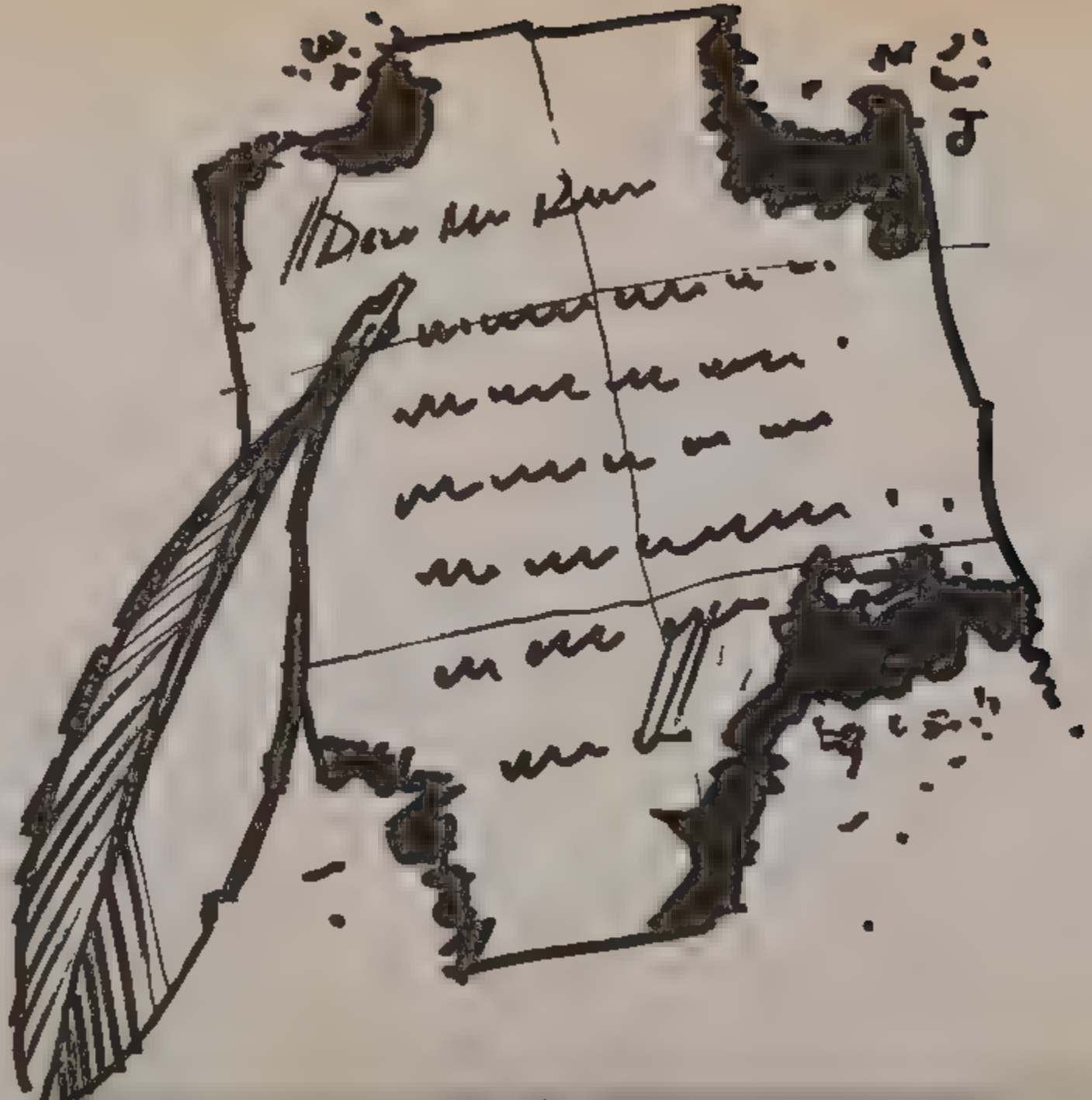
When Flora came down to breakfast, I said heh up, have you heard the news about Jake.

He's getting married? It was such a quick reply, and the old trout for a moment looked so startled, that I laughed till my jaw started aching again. He's obviously having a trific time, I said, must be loving Florence, if he's thinking about staying another three months, and hadn't he shown enterprise, getting himself fixed up with a job.

You jealous? That was Flora again. Probably true. Can I be jealous of my own son? I never had a year off before University. He's having such fun in his, doing exciting, exotic things. My pre-University holiday job was stacking wood in a timber yard in Carlisle. Oh yes, very cultural.

This woman who's hired him, surely you can remember other things he told you?

Listen dear, when you ring him on Friday, *you* can cross examine him this time. And ask them if they need an assistant gardener out there. I know someone who could do with the break.



Red Letter Day

Flora is burning her homework. No, it's not a ritual act, the children's liberation movement making a public gesture of their contempt for the work ethic. She's simply burning the work she's just completed. That's what Miss said they might do. When you've finished, try putting it in some flames.

I dunno. All seems potty to me. Mark my words, Flora. It will all end in tears. Both sorts. Your homework will be in shreds, if it survives the flames, then you'll start crying.

Keep out of it you, she replied. You're no help at all when it comes to homework, so just shurrup, eh.

What she's been doing, for this last hour, is writing a letter from Jane Eyre to Mr Rochester. Are you with me. Do concentrate. Well, when you're a first-year at comprehensive, you dive straight into the classics, none of this *Janet and John* or *Just William* juvenile stuff. Bring on the greats. The whole class of twelve-year-olds, apparently, has been loving *Jane Eyre*. Not the book, stupid, They watch it on the video. Charlotte Brontè would be surprised. (Or was it Emily? I always get them mixed up. I daren't say it out loud or Flora will scream at me. She thinks I'm a dum-dum anyway.)

Flora has written a lovely letter. I know because I sneaked a look at it when she was out of the room, very neat, dated 1826, which she says is the year the book took place, and who am I to argue. She did ask about how you would finish a letter, back in 1826, either See You Soon, Love Jane, or would it be Cheerio for Now? My wife suggested making it very simple, signing it just from Your Dear Friend, Jane

Eyre. I didn't suggest anything. I just get shouted at if I suggest anything in this house.

The object is to get the style right, for 1826, and the sentiments between Jane and Mr Rochester right, and then, wait for it, this is the bit she has looked forward to most, they have to try to make the paper on which the letter is written look as old as possible. Crease it a bid, add a few stains, and then perhaps, so the teacher suggested, discolour the edges by putting it in flames. What a daft thing to suggest. I think some of these teachers need shottin'.

We don't have no flames in our house, being CH, although at week-ends we do have our illegal little log fire upstairs, just for me and the old trout, a pick-me-up after the put-me-downs of the week, a treat for good behaviour, and every Saturday evening we sit before it with our drinkiepoos, watching each other carefully, no, none of that soppy stuff, just to make sure the other does not take more than the fair share of the Fleurie. That's my new passion. I buy it for the name. Reminds me of Flora. But at that price we drink only one bottle a week.

There is no fire on yet, that comes later this evening, and Flora naturally can't wait, which is why she's standing in the kitchen holding her beautifully written letter over the gas stove. I'm not allowed to interfere. But I know at any moment the whole lot will go up in flames.

For once, it is the sort of homework I could help with, we literary folk, but she wants to do it all by her own. That was a Jake phrase. 'All by my own.' She is just like Jake with her homework. She will insist on doing it in the living-room, right amongst all the noise, with the telly going, my lady wife in the kitchen, Grandma wandering up and down reciting Burns.

Flora has got her own perfectly nice bedroom upstairs, room enough and more for her homework, with a desk and a lamp, utter peace and tranquillity, with no one to disturb her, but will she go there, will she heckers. We spent years shouting at Jake to go up to his own room to do his homework, but he never would, not till he was fifth-year. I suppose he thought he was missing something. Can't think

what. We all know Grandma's recitations by now.

'Do you know any poetry, Flora?' She says that every five minutes, ever so brightly, with no knowledge at all that she asked the same question five minutes ago. Flora is very good with her and never gets bad-tempered. Well, she is doing her homework. Got to concentrate. I suppose it must teach you something, managing to do homework in the middle of all this.

When I was a lad, no don't go away, we only had one room. Well, there was a bathroom, inside as well, what a boaster, but that was full of packets of Woodbine.

At this time of year, the bedroom was always freezing. You could skate on the bare lino and there was enough ice on the inside of the windows to stock a freezer. In the end, when I got to the fifth year, and was on to serious stuff, I used to go down town to the Reference Library to meet the girls, what am I saying, to get some proper work done, Mum, I can't work in this place, with that stupid Tommy Handley on the radio and all those clothes steaming in front of the fire. And why can't you keep coal in the bath like normal people.

I know I *could* help Flora with her English, but she won't let me. Nor am I allowed ever again to sign for her homework. A good system this, getting a parent to sign to say the homework has been done and how long was spent on it. We never had that system at school.

Last week, feeling a bit frivolous I suppose, anything to brighten up this dull old life, I signed her homework 'H. Davies, Esq'. God, the scenes when she came back from school. Seemed to me a perfectly harmless thing to do. For weeks now I've just signed H. Davies and it was getting a bit boring. You'd have thunk I'd written some obscenity. What harm can a little Esq do, Flora? But that's it. Her mama has to sign from now on. Has some teacher made a teacher-like comment? I still don't know what I did wrong.

The strange thing is that Flora, egged on by my lady wife, has decided that I can do maths. Every time she gets stuck, she gets sent to me. We all know my wife isn't much good, but I'm not much better. It's just that I do all the sums and

paperwork and bills and finances in this house, don't say I don't help. Flora thinks I'm some sort of genius at maths and she will insist on coming up to me, when I'm typing or reading, plonking her work card under my nose and saying, quick, how do I answer that one.

New Maths are hellish. The whole language has completely changed. They even seem to count a different way. So many of her work cards are based on premises I don't understand and can never enter. We were brought up to count in tens, but they have exercises in which you go up to five, or seven, or nine, and then you add on extra numbers, though they call them modules or nodules or matrices or some such. They start off with words I don't follow, and then numbers and examples and drawings which don't make sense.

So I turn off the electricity, as my typewriter humming drives me mad, unless I'm actually typing, and very slowly I ask Flora if I can read the other work cards, or take your hand away, dear, let me at least see the previous questions. I stare blankly, wondering where I am. She then grabs it from me and flounces away.

With a bit of time, such as a couple of years, I probably could work out what the hell is going on, but she expects me, as a grown-up, as someone who's supposed to be able to count, to know at once what is going on. It's like coming into a film in the middle, one made in Poland, or perhaps Paris, Texas, and trying to get hold of the plot. Very hard for anyone. But Flora, she won't give me a chance.

Oh no! It's happened. I can see flames in the kitchen. Jane Eyre's letter, in her best joined-up handwriting, has gone up in smoke. I better not say I told you so, but I did tell you so, Flora.

She's now settled down to write it out again. Taken it very well, considering. This time she's going to use a candle. And I am being allowed, oh rapture, to hold the candle. We'll do it over the sink. Let's hope we don't bung up the drains with the candle grease.

As a little surprise, while she's been writing it out again I've just been upstairs to my room. You know I collect

stamps. Well, I also collect Postal History, which means envelopes, though we call them covers, we professionals. There were, of course, no stamped envelopes in 1826, as stamps did not come in till 1840, but a few weeks ago I bought a bundle of Free Fronts at an auction. These are envelopes which MPs and Lords send from Parliament. I buy them for the signatures.

Guess what. I've found a real live envelope, the genuine article, with the postmark on it saying 1826. And it's addressed to Yorkshire.

When Flora has finally got her letter finished, and then together we manage to get it suitably aged with a candle, fingers crossed, I'll present her with this wonderful 1826 envelope to put her 1826 letter in. What a good Dad. Nobody can say I don't help with homework. Sometimes.

HUNT'S
TOMATO SOUP
98

Fresher Fields

Jake started college today. We've just got back from driving him there with all his junk, finding his room and carting his stuff from the car.

All week there's been great excitement, with endless farewells to his friends, as if they were never going to meet again, but at the same time a lot of moaning and groaning. Clothes. That's been a right bugger. He's got through his entire school career without wearing a collar and tie, or a jacket, and as for a suit, I don't think he's even seen one. Yet in this pile of Freshers' literature that came for him, outlining all the good times ahead, it clearly says that a suit will be useful for formal occasions.

I remember buying my first suit the minute I got to Durham in 1954, charcoal grey it was, Burton's best, what a scorcher, didn't I feel smart, and I wore it constantly for four years till it was so shiny you could see your face in it. I wore it for informal hops, don't you know. As for formal dances, your actual balls, that was evening dress, or perhaps the college blazer. Gawd, it sounds like the Dark Ages.

Against my principles, Hunt, I'm not buying no suit.

Up to you, my petal, but your dear mama has worked out a clothes allowance for you. She thinks you'll need two new pairs of trousers, two shirts, two pairs of shoes, and you should be able to get all that lot for £140. As for the suit, I'll come with you if you like. Price to be negotiated. I'm not a hard man. Want you to look presentable, don't we. Not really, he said.

He was out for a whole day and did every shop in London and returned with a pair of jeans and a sports T-shirt. That's

all he's worn throughout his school life, so goodness knows why it took so long. He bought the T-shirt in Take Six, of blessed memory. Twenty years ago, newly arrived in London, I used to haunt Take Six in my lunch hours, looking for cheap T-shirts. In fact, hold on Jake, stand still, was it at the end of the rack, near the door. Thought I recognised it.

He *nearly* tried on a suit in Take Six, but decided against it. One of his friends, who also started college today, actually put on a suit, thanks to his mother standing over him, then chickened out.

So we all met up in the Oxford Circus Marks later in the week, as if I haven't got enough to do, and he trailed round making faces at every suit, every coat-hanger. What about a jacket, just to give yourself cover? You might get invited to sherry with the chaplain, that's what happens, Jake, on your first week at university. Then you never see him again.

In the end, thanks to the Old Trout's endeavours, he did buy some new trousers, shirts and shoes, but he held out against any jacket or suit. Sometimes I think he takes not being a posho too far.

I did notice, though, when we were loading the car this morning, that he had packed an old jacket of mine. Just for emergencies. And the OT had forced one of my ties into his plastic bags. A lot of good that will do him. Who's going to tie it for him. Can't shout for his Mummy, now he's at Varsity. He did once wear a tie, correction, when he was lower down the school and the Queen came on a visit, but a master tied it for him.

The car was loaded, which I was very pleased about, as at last I've got rid of all my petrol station tumblers, the free ones I've been saving for yonkers, except that she won't let me save them in the house, they are so vulgar, so I've been keeping them in the side passage. I did try them on Caitlin, two years ago when she started university, but she saw them just in time and put them straight back in the side passage. That old kettle which is all furred inside, also got rid of that, and some crockery which we always hated.

When we took Caitlin to Sussex for her first day, I had

to park miles from her room and it took ages carting all the stuff back and forward. Today, we got really close to Jake's place, which was handy. I'm two years older now, and not nearly as strong as I was. (Can't mention which university Jake's at, by the way. I'll get thumped if I do. You'll just have to search for clues.)

He took one look at his room and decided he hated it. Oh Gawd. Just like Caitlin. She didn't like hers for the opposite reasons to Jake. She wanted to be *away* from the student high jinks, off the campus, in a room of her own in Brighton itself, which she organised after just one term, and was immediately much happier. Jake doesn't like his room because he's not, apparently, with the bulk of the first year, where all the action is. Or so he thinks.

At the same time as Jake started today, Caitlin has begun her year at the University of California at Davis. It's part of her American Studies course, to have a year in America. Another lucky beggar.

We've always been led to believe that where Jake has gone today would be trific, as everyone always says so, but advance reports about Davis, a place we'd never heard of, had indicated it was a Cow Town. But Caitlin loves it, judging by her letters. There's a pool just outside her apartment and Davis itself is supposed to be the Berkeley of the Eighties, very popular and desirable, clean and bright, where everyone cycles and is into cleanliness and hard work. Sounds every parent's dream.

The town's main industry seems to be canning tomatoes. They're working on the world's first square tomato. Or have they already done so. Her letters aren't clear. I do hope she sends Flora some for Christmas.

Guess what the main cannery is called? Caitlin has sent me this little cutting from the local paper which I'd like to share with you:

> At the extreme north end of town, but still on the East side, sits the beautiful Hunt's cannery, where on foggy mornings the whole town can partake of tomato soup simply by breathing.

> Due to long lines of tourists—not to mention tomato trucks—on week-ends, it is best to arrange your tour of Hunt's early on a weekday.

Not content with misspelling the name of their town, they also take my Christian name in vain. Well, it amused Caitlin. Oh, here's another little cutting she's sent. It looks as if she's perhaps been looking for jobs, to eke out the miserable money I allow her.

> **HELP WANTED**
>
> **London Fish 'n Chips** Part-time position available for persons who can speak a little Chinese. Please come to 129 E St, Davis. Tel. 753-7210 for interview.

Her courses have just started, and she's got on the ones she wanted, after hours of queuing. Her tutor has written a book on Willa Cather, who happens to be one of Caitlin's heroines, and has his room plastered with photographs of her.

I know it will take a week or two for Jake to settle down. It always does. Being a Fresher is pretty draggy. All those crowded meetings and nasty instant coffee and over-excited second year half-wits trying to con subscriptions. You hang around with people you don't particularly like, as they just happen to be in the same corridor, or same classes, then you spend the rest of the year trying to shake them off.

But I still envy him. I told him this all day, so he was probably glad to see the back of us. All these new people and activities, Jake, the experiments that can be made, new sensations tried, and if you don't like it, try another. It was thanks to the student newspaper at Durham, Jake, are you listening, that by chance I got into writing. Huh. So they're to blame, are they.

We had a poor lunch, but then he's at a place which is surprisingly rotten for restaurants. (There, that's another clue.) And then we came home. It's now just after six o'clock and Flora is already in her pyjamas. Well, what else is there to do.

I might feel envious of our older two, and all their studentish excitements to come, but back here we could have a v. boring term ahead. This old house rather creaks. Listen to those echoes. For the next ten weeks, Flora is an only child.

Davies v Forster

I am often asked, as I go about the planet addressing Women's Institutes, talking to Masonics, lecturing undergraduates, advising Royalty, assisting at soup kitchens, talking to myself, if I am ever jealous of my wife. The quick answer is, yes.

At the moment, I certainly am. Her latest novel got on the bestseller list and I'm sick as Flaubert's parrot. Wish I'd had a novel in the hit parade. Lucky beggar.

The slow answer is, no. What people are really suggesting is that, with two writers in the same house, husband and wife, shifting the words all day, there must be some, er, how can we put this, Hunt, tensions.

I suppose an actor and actress living together might feel some domestic strain, if one is out of work more than the other; or two dustmen, if one can no longer hump the heavy loads; or two teachers, if they advance at different rates or strike on different days. But I have to say, hand on wallet and pen on heart, that me and the Old Trout have never had a cross word or ill feeling about our respective jobs.

But we do have gentle sparring on one topic, the way all parents do, regardless of whether they are in the same line of business. For twenty-one years, as we have observed *les enfants* growing up, or trying to, we have looked at them, and our own respective families whence we have come, and said THAT'S YOUR SIDE COMING OUT.

Well-defined characteristics have emerged, traits which we all accept have come from one set of genes. Outsiders might not spot them, but we think we can see these family distinctions very clearly. Every seven years or so, when new

skins seem to be uncovered and come to prominence, we stand back and say, heh up, that's the Davies coming out. Or, look at that, isn't she a typical Forster.

So in our little house it's Davies v Forster, in the nicest possible sense, as we calculate the odds, examine the ratings, see who's leaping up the Top Ten.

Forsters have standards. They could drive you mad, these bleedings standards, but they are definitely there, in so many parts of their life. For a start, they're always tidy and organised and well turned-out. Her Dad, at eighty-five, keeps himself and his house and his life spotless. Her brother and sister are the same. I've worked on her over the years, of course, to get things in proportion, and at first glance our house does look Forster fit, with everything in its place. But unlike true Forsters, a second glance will reveal the dust, things shoved in corners. I am winning. Slowly.

Flora is following the Forster pattern, and likes to be immaculate, even when it's casual. She folds her clothes the way Mummy thinks the world should, and has drawers that could be inspected at any time. Oh, these Forsters. They're so fastidious.

By comparison, Davieses are sluts. I blow my nose on my scarf without thinking, well it is *my* scarf, while my wife and Flora recoil in genuine norror, how can you, that's disgusting. I will use someone else's toothbrush if I can't find mine, wipe my hands on any towel, put on yesterday's clothes for ever, drink straight from the milk bottle, and other gross habits too horrible to discuss. And as for my clothes cupboard, please don't look. I'll never get it closed again. I've just jammed it with a sleeve.

Caitlin, at the last count, and we haven't seen her for six months, is a Davies in that respect. Imagine a Forster even contemplating living in a communal squat. Ugh. Oh yes, I get the blame, she gets all that from me, all my fault, don't say it. At least in her work, Caitlin is a Forster. Terribly organised.

Jake is sort of in-between. His college room is very untidy and scruffy, but it's also fairly bare. Unlike true Davieses, he doesn't go through life trailing clouds of clutter.

Forsters have standards of behaviour. There are things they will and will not do. You can't budge them. Once they've made up their minds, that's it. She won't lower these standards, whether refusing to go on a programme she disapproves of, or having a cup of tea when she's already said no. If the latest cheap wine turns out to be not so good, she'll say no more, thanks, while I'll say yes, it's not so good, then I'll finish off the whole bottle. I'll always accept second best, even third and fourth. I'm not proud.

They're so decisive, these Forsters, which I do admire, well, mostly, while we Davieses twit on for ever, tying ourselves in knots, going back and forward, hiffing and havering, rehearsing all the possibilities, driving everyone mad, including ourselves. Jake and Flora are very decisive. You always get a yes or a no, whatever the topic. No messing. Me and Caitlin usually say yes, then no, then yes again. Well, if I knew my own mind, I might follow it.

But is this decisiveness so wonderful? I've noticed with Jake, and now with Flora, that they will not go to certain places, join certain clubs, deciding instantly, usually for good reasons, that it will be draggy. So they stay at home, moaning that they're bored.

Caitlin always had a hectic social life at this stage, though the Forsters will sneer, saying this was because she often accepted second best. We Davieses like to think that we say yes to life. We're sociable and gregarious, even if we come back and moan and wish we hadn't gone.

She thinks I would have survived in a Prisoner of War camp, yes, that's the sort of chat we have over the cocoa when times are slack. I'd eat the rats and lick other people's greasy plates. She'd stick it out. She'd maintain, like Sidney Carton, that it's a far far better thing I am doing, and go to the guillotine, while I'd say me sir, yes sir, anything you say sir.

In our house we have Davies Time and Forster Time. I like to catch the train as it's leaving the station, or the post as the van is about to disappear round the corner, or be at the pictures as the credits begin. It gives me such pleasure. I often come home glowing at 5.31 of an evening, having

run after the postie and shoved my letters in his surprised hands as he's driving, catching the last post once again. Clever old Hunt. My lady wife, and Flora, consider good time-keeping to mean being ready, if not actually there, one hour before the off. Potty, I call it.

Forsters are artistic, I will say that. They do surround themselves with lovely things. Well, I have to say that or I'll get thumped. They can turn dumps into treasure-houses by their presence alone, rearranging a few leaves, putting plates a nice way, turning round the furniture, chucking out that repulsive object at once, who on earth put that there. My lady wife, Flora and Caitlin all have that Forster gift. Me and Jake, well, have you seen our drawers? That used to be a family phrase when Flora was very little. You keep rubbish in your drawers, so she would say to me, following me round the house.

Davieses are usually popular, so we like to think, never having rows or arguments with people. They, on the other hand, will allege that this comes from being spineless. As for the Forsters, they will give their personal opinion, and insist on it, whether they have been asked or not, and one of them has been known, in her time, to leave people quaking.

No, that's not quite true. I had a row with a woman the other week, about education, while she hasn't had a violent argument for ages. She's becoming ever so nice, almost Davies-like.

That's what has happened over recent years. We've picked up bits from each other, swapped the genes, copied traits. Now we tend to sit back and see what we've done together, identifying the elements which the baton-carriers of the future will take with them.

Yankee Doodles

Would we recognise Caitlin? After all, we haven't seen our oldest, and these days our most reasonable, for over seven months. She might have changed her hair, her clothes, her accent. Her clothes are bound to have changed, said Flora. She left the UK carrying a plastic bag full of her worldly possessions. She'll have stocked up in local thrift shops by now.

Would she recognise us? I don't think I've changed much—few more wrinklettes, couple of grey hairlings. The Old Trout, well, she's always looked the same to me, ever since I first saw her, aged fourteen. Wonderful.

Jake, so we like to think, has become much more mature in the last six months, now that he's an undergraduate. Doesn't cry at all when you take his toys away. Even does his own shoe laces. But Flora, wowee, Caitlin really might not recognise her at all. She's shot up, and it's not just her mama's shoes. When I see her coming down the street these days, I think who's this young lady.

We set off from San Francisco first thing after breakfast, heading for Interstate 80, the OT clutching the map, Jake and Flora clutching their Walkmen, me clutching my eyes as we seemed to have been driving for yonkers and still hadn't crossed the Bay Bridge, are you sure we're heading the right way, woman, don't want to end up in Japan, chop chop.

The town of Davis is only seventy-five miles inland from San Franny, but it seemed to get hotter and more tropical with every mile. The rest of the world, which included us till five days previously, assumes that everywhere in

California is hot, they all have swimming-pools, sun-tans, brilliant teeth, their own hair. But in San Francisco and the Bay area they get a lot of rain, cold weather, mist, baldness, just like us.

Caitlin is at present at the University of California, which has nine campuses in all, including Davis. It's in a little country town also called Davis. All year I wanted to send her a letter addressed to Davies, Davis, Davis, till I found out there were 20,000 students there, probably hundreds called Davies, thousands called Davis. Not that we ever speak to them. We're the pedigree people.

America doesn't look much like America these days, not on the roads. They seem to have cut down on those monster roadside adverts, and the cars have positively shrunk. They're all titchy Japanese or European ones. Only the poor still drive big, old-fashioned, Yankee cars. Just as only the poor are fat. Only the deprived eat hamburgers. Only children chew gum. Only the working classes smoke. How's that for generalisations. Marvellous how, in five days in one town, you can sum up 250 million people. No problem. You're welcome.

We'd booked into a motel just outside Davis, as Davis is too tasteful a campus to have such vulgar things, but we took one look at it and the OT said drive on, I'm not staying here. I thought about driving on to New York, just to show her, but that could have taken five months, and Caitlin would be back in London by then. Come on then, clever clogs, where should we stay?

In the end we found a motel which passed the OT Test, if only just. We got the receptionist to take us to look at two possible rooms first, to check for noise. Very obliging, American hotel people. You'd get the bum's rush if you tried that in London. You're lucky to get them to speak to you.

Each room had a colour telly, fridge, bathroom, lashings of space and quite good soft furnishings, plus a microwave oven. What's all this then, I said. All I want is a cup of tea in the morning. I'm not cooking for a regiment.

Look, stop messing around, you fool, we've come 10,000 miles to see Caitlin, not to have you clucking like an old

hen about your stupid morning tea. What a pain you can be.

Caitlin used to lived in one room in I Street, when she first moved to Davis, which I rather fancied visiting, if just for the name, I mean the letter, but a few months ago she moved to her own place, self-contained, in somewhere called Olive Drive. Very English-sounding. In her letters, she's been thrilled by it, very pleased to have got it, and for about the same rent as before, $185 a month.

I'll have to take this next bit carefully. You know I never like to offend people, always sensitive to moods and feelings. Okay, Old Trout is not a very nice way to refer to one's wife, but come on, it's an old joke between friends, everyone knows that, she doesn't mind, honestly she doesn't.

So I'll say at once that Caitlin looked trific. Best we've seen her looking for several years, so brown and healthy, glowing and radiant, and doing ever so well. Do you know, while we were there in Davis, she was offered a position as a TA. Isn't that great. Yes, we didn't know about this either, but in American universities there's such a thing as a Teacher's Assistant, usually someone doing graduate work, who helps the professor, doing things like marking students' work. And she gets paid. I didn't find that out till after I'd given her the cheque for her next term's bills. Not that I would have given her less. I'm not that mean, well, not quite. She will have to work for it. But what an honour.

Anyway, her abode. One morning we arrived to pick her up and there was this smart little van outside with a uniformed chap knocking on her front door. He looked as if he might have arrived from the Davis version of Harrods, bringing a hamper for madam. Then we saw the writing on the side of the van: TERMITE CONTROL.

Oh, just a few cockroaches, look Flora, here's a dead one. Whoppers, aren't they. All that white powder round every room, just chemicals I've been putting down to stop them taking over.

She has, I admit, got two fairly large rooms, plus a kitchen and shower room. All of them bare. Absolutely bare. Yes, there is a fridge, big enough to hold parties in, and a cooker. But that's all. Nothing on the floors. No furniture. No bed,

even. She seems to do her essays sitting on the bare floor.

But who are we to criticise? Pathetic specimen that I am, twitting on about needing a kettle and tea by my king-size bed in my luxury fitted motel room. She loves her apartment. What does it matter to us if it seems worse than the squat she once lived in near King's Cross. That did have a table. She is obviously very happy. I'll move on quickly, in order not to give more offence.

We loved Davis, the campus and the town, so attractive and green and such nice students and a nice atmosphere. Every parent would love to have a child studying at Davis. And such yummy houses, all low two-storey buildings, with trees and gardens, all beautifully kept. I Street was in the heart of the town and seemed very pleasant to me, but of course you've done trif, Caitlin, really good, getting a whole place to yourself, right by the railway line, on the wrong side of the tracks, sorry, I mean on the more interesting side of the tracks.

We had some very good meals all together, once I'd sussed out that not every restaurant in Davis was vegetarian. Caitlin, you see, is. Naturally, she veered that way, when she was thinking of places. Me and Jake, real men both, like to eat quiche, now and again. Underdone, of course, so you can see the blood.

Luckily, Caitlin, despite her few possessions, had bought real coffee for our visit, and found a bashed-up, red coffee-pot in some thrift shop, so it was a pleasure to be invited into her wondrous home and be treated. And, in the end, we got used to her place. Interesting. Yes, I think that's the word I should have used in the first place. Just like the whole visit.

Veggie Burgers

They're so selfish in this house. Here's me trying to keep the economy going single-handed, helping my fellow workers to increase production, hoping not to cause further unemployment, and I suddenly seem to be surrounded by people who are GIVING UP.

At supper this evening, Flora pushed away her glass and said, that's it, I'm not having Coca-Cola any more, I've given it up. She'd only taken one sip, and there were at least fifteen cubes of ice in her rotten glass, as she has this passion for ice. All that waste, all the electricity that went into running that fridge, and the floor space it takes up, and now she says she doesn't want it no more.

But you always said it was poison. You always said it was full of sugar, bad for your teeth and bad for your health. You should be pleased I've now given it up.

No, I'm not. It's the last straw. Hold on, we've got a whole packet of straws in the cupboard. Who's going to use those stupid straws if you've given up drinking Coke. And they're those dopey bendy ones, double the price of straight straws. I dunno.

I blame the Old Trout. She's completely changed her drinking habits, so Flora is now starting to do the same. No, I don't. I really blame that Gorbachev. Ever since we've gotten back from Russia, she's not been her normal self.

I count a normal self as someone who drinks at least half a bottle of wine a day, perhaps more if there's something to celebrate, such as getting to six o'clock without having a drink.

In Russia, we could hardly get any drink, so she decided

not to try, and now the habit has stuck. Days and days pass without a drop going near her, in fact it's now a whole week since she last had any wine. She might, or she might not, have a glass at Sunday lunch. Just depends. From now on she'll ask herself, do I really need it, do I really want it, is it just habit, should I really. Oh shut up, you old bat, just don't expect me to be so sensible, that's all. You go your own way, and I'll go mine. Where's the corkscrew?

I've been determined not to moderate my ever-so-moderate habits. I'm just a social drinker, truly I am, I just drink to be social. Hello Hunt, you've had a hard day, pull up a crate and sit down, take the weight off your wallet. But a strange thing has happened. Because *she* has cut down, *my* intake has been reduced as well. Though Gawd knows, I have tried hard.

I now realise that much of our drinking was competitive. We'd mark the bottle, half each, make sure we had exactly the same sized glasses, which is very hard in this house as they are all different sizes, I blame that Shell garage. Then we'd watch each other like hawks, making sure no one got more, no one cheated, no one drank from the other person's glass when they went to answer the phone, oh I've seen it done, stop at nothing, some people.

Half the fun has gone out of it. I can now drink a whole bottle, if I like, but what's the point. There's nothing or nobody to stop me, so there's no sense of achievement, no real savouring of having won an extra half-inch while she was on the phone. OK, it was me.

Drinking half a bottle all on my own has resulted in half a bottle being left. When you buy the sort of cheap plonk I buy, it turns to vinegar by the next day. Sharing a bottle together meant it went in one go. Bottles have now been lying around with bits in them for days, when previously twelve minutes was a record for an un-opened bottle. In the end, I've been chucking stuff out. Yes, I know I'll go to the Bad Fire, as my mother used to say.

Even worser than the drink situation, both Flora and her mama have announced they have given up meat. Oh yes, all right for them to indulge themselves, think only of their

own pleasure. Every bloomin' night this week, we have had veggie food.

Look, lasses, I do man's work, it's not easy at the typewriter face, shifting all those heavy words. When I come down of an evening, get washed, take my dirty clothes off, God, the struggle changing that ribbon today, I want to tuck in to good old roast beef or good old steak or good old veal, but bloody hell, not stir-fried vegetables again.

You're right, Hunt. It's not stir-fried vegetables today. It's pasta.

I'm not totally prejudiced. I'm willing to have some pasta now and again, such as once a year, as a first course. This was naked. Bare pasta, just as it came out of the womb, or wherever pasta comes from. Any meat-balls, you guys? What, not even tomato sauce? Oh, come on then, get the grated cheese out, stop messing around. As a huge concession, I was eventually allowed to put something on my plateful of naked pasta—salt and pepper. Big deal.

That's another thing she gave up in Russia. Salt. There was a third bit of idiocy, now what was it? Oh, that's right. I just read about it at the end of her Russian diary. 'In Russia, I did without alcohol, salt and a pillow.'

Well, bully for you. Well done, my petal. Just don't blame me if the pillow manufacturers have a deputation on our doorstep. I expect the salt mines have already closed.

She's always had this weakness in her. As a little girl, when she was a fervent Christian, her favourite time of the year was Lent. She looked forward to it so much. I thought I'd knocked some sense into her, these twenty-six years. Now I fear it could always be Lent from now on.

Look, what are you trying to prove. No one thinks any better of you. Just a fashion, that's all. You're one of the health freak herd. All this veggie nonsense. Any minute now they'll prove that vegetables are bad for you, then you'll all come rushing back, ha ha.

Flora has never been much of a meat-eater, but now she too has given it up. She's in the third-year. They get these notions. I saw a report last week which says that 20 per cent of our school children have become vegetarians. The

nation's dinner-ladies must be going spare. Who wants seconds of these spam fritters? These words had them stampeding across the gym when I was a lad. I wonder why we ate in the gym. Always meant to ask. Now they probably can't get rid of the firsts. It's all salad bars and other soppy stuff.

They're causing me to cut down on my food and on my drink, that's what I'm really furious about. Yes, I do feel pretty healthy at present, thanks for asking, and the old jaw has been goodish for some time now, but that's not the point. I like stuffing myself. It gives a shape to the day, looking forward to a grand tuck-in, eh lad, can't beat it. I'm sure I've years of eating left in me.

They say that with age you naturally cut down, as the body's metabolism bla bla bla, but I'm not at that stage yet. I'm as greedy as I ever was. Is that your cold toasted cheese over there? Bags me, if you're leaving it.

Where will it all end, this cutting down nonsense. She asked if we truthfully needed a car, living in London, all those nasty fumes, so much healthier to walk everywhere. And what about Caitlin's bedroom, and Jake's bedroom? Now they're away at college half the year, should we let some poor person have them? We don't need all that space any more, it's time we cut down.

On your bike. Yes, that's a good idea, she said. You could mend that old one, then we could really do without the car.

I'm going to bed early. I get so tired these days. I think it's lack of meat and drink. I start yawning the moment I've had my stir-fried pasta. So, I'm off. Let's hope our bed is still there. If she's bought a futon behind my back, she's for it.

Late Night Reveries

We were lying in bed last night, my Good Friend and I, when I turned to her and said where's Flora.

No, she doesn't sleep with us, not no more, well she is fourteen. I meant where is my little Flora, my own little petal, whereabouts on the planet is she at this very moment?

That party, you know, we both agreed she could go, perfectly harmless, we know the house and all the people, what are you fussing about.

I had locked and double-locked all the doors and windows, thinking it's so nice to have Caitlin and Jake safe at college, rather than coming home in the middle of the night. I'd forgotten Flora. She'd gone out to her first late evening event, but I'd told her I wanted her back here at 10.30, pronto, no messing. Oh no, life is repeating itself. This is where we came in with Caitlin.

I can be a hard man, especially talking to myself, which I mostly am, in this house.

And it was then, at 10.31 precisely, as the cat flies, that I said to the GF, where is that Flora? Note the use of the word 'that'. How could you translate that 'that' into a foreign language? It's an admonishing 'that', yet with a hint of affection.

Look, are you going to listen to *A Book at Bedtime* or are you going to twit on all night.

Sorry, your ladysmith. It's just that I told her 10.30, so where the heckers is she.

And I told her 11 o'clock.

Oh Gawd, here we go, here we go, here we go, again. Don't say she's going to play us off, just as the Big Two did.

I lay awake, fuming, I do make rather strong cocoa, and before my eyes there stretched ahead the Next Four Year Plan and I thought oh no, I can't go through that once more, I'm too old, too tired, please let me off, I promise to be awfully good if You do.

I pulled the blankets round my head, tried hard to think of something nice, such as chocolate cake. Yes, that was interesting. I hate all cakes, but the other day Flora came out with a little childhood memory; when her grandmother was babysitting for her, she woke up one night terrified and her gran sat by her bed and said there there Flora, you'll soon go to sleep, just think of your favourite cake. And it worked.

For years and years, I used to lie awake in this very bed wondering where the hell either Caitlin or Jake had got to. It is London, they have to learn, survive this and they're fit for anything in life, such as being a traffic warden.

You know what it's like. You imagine awful things. You wait for the police to call, the hospital to ring, or even worse, falling asleep with the radio still on. Have you seen the price of PP9 batteries these days.

I don't know why you are making such a song and dance. It is our fault, said the GF. Not their fault. We are the ones who are unnatural, going to bed at ten o'clock every night.

It is true that Caitlin used to come home and tell us about the parents of her friends who would still be up at one o'clock when their offspring came home and say have some tea, some sandwiches darlings, shall I cook you something, come on, tell us what you've been doing. Then they'd all talk, late into the next morning.

I am told this is common. In fact, I am told there are many, many parents like this. I don't believe a word of it.

In our house, I expect our children either to stay in all their lives, until they leave home, or if they must be out in the evening, to come home by 10.30, creeping up the stairs in absolute silence, without pulling any lav chains, putting on any kettles, banging any doors, and I'd be obliged if they went to sleep in the dark, preferably without breathing.

Flora's bedroom is exactly above our bedroom. The

floorboards are more like sounding-boards. The slightest movement, and our whole room shakes. I went through years of agony when Caitlin had it, suffering the monstrous regiments of her friends. Flora's friends look like being even bigger. I blame that National Health. (Note that 'that' again.)

Should we change the bedrooms round for the next four years? Or fix silencers. Or how about moving into a flat or a hotel till the war is over. I've seen the past, and I fear it's going to be the future all over again.

Experience never seems to do you any good. The new version hits you when you least expect it, and in a slightly different way. Oh, it's okay telling other people, passing on advice. Surgeon, heal thyself.

All right then clever clogs, what are the rules going to be this time round. Let's make it clear from the very beginning, before we have to bring down the heavy hand, not that we have to yet. My goodness no, Flora is still my little petal, all five feet six and a quarter inches of her. I measured them all in on New Year's Day, and I measured them all out again.

It depends what *you* decide, what *you* want to do. You're the father. Try to act like one for a change. But before you start thinking up half-baked regulations, just remember what you were like at her age.

Come off it. Do me a favour. Carlisle in the 1950s. You were there. It was like being in a monastery. 'Sleep-over' meant sleeping in late and not delivering the papers on time. There was none of this late night partying, far less staying out all night with friends.

Did you spare a thought for your mother? Did you ever realise what it must have been like for her, you the oldest, her with an invalid husband, huh?

Look, I've told you. I was nae bother at 'a, for the simple reason I didn't go anywhere.

What about Keswick, August 4, 1956?

Cue for moody music, skiffle in background, Brylcreemed hair, radios with fan grills, Woodbines at tuppence a pint. Need I say more. I'm sure yous all have been there, or thereabouts.

Yes, that was a famous victory for a radical chick behaviour. Even now I am amazed by our daring, our flaunting of all known conventions. What we did was walk home. I knew you'd be shocked. Alone. Yup, not one chaperone.

It had been a beaut day in Keswick, typically marvellous Lakeland weather, no rain for minutes on end, and we'd lolled by Derwentwater, ambled up Catbells, and when the time came to catch the last bus back to Carlisle, we said blow it, let's deliberately walk all the way home. Only thirty miles. We can do it. Hand in hand in the moonlight.

Every August 4, we still say to each other, remember Keswick. It's our secret. We haven't got many, gawd knows. Like living in a goldfish bowl round here, with them tramping upstairs all night long with their seven-foot friends and then jumping on those floorboards and turning on their awful thumping Reggie beat.

Did you think about your mother that night?

Do you know, from that moment until then, I never had. I've got through all these chapters of my life so far without ever stopping for one second to imagine what it must have been like for my Mum. She must have been going spare all night, imagining we'd been drowned, or fallen off a crag, involved in a bus crash, abducted, eaten alive by tramps.

When I dragged myself in at seven o'clock in the morning, she said never a word of admonition. Not even: That Hunter.

Photo Finish

I'm always saying and thinking heh up, another stage in life has been reached, another bench mark on the family table, even when it's just a grey hair in my 'tash or a new crack in that kitchen wall.

But this time I feel we have clambered over a milestone. Caitlin, our first-born, has just gone off abroad for two years. When will we see her again. Even more remarkable, she is self-supporting.

Goodness, I never thought that last phrase would ever leave my typewriter. Not many of us around who can say that, who can boast that any offspring is not costing us something. No, she is not quite earning, not in the normal sense, but for the moment, and I hope the next moment, she is in charge of her own finances.

From now on, it's up to you Caity-Cateyes. Gosh, I haven't called her that for twenty years. Over and out.

She should by now be in Clark. I dunno where Clark is. The map is in the other room. Don't universities in the USA have funny names. It was strange when she had that year at Davis, which turned out to be in a town called Davis, out in sunny California. Until a few months ago, she was going to a place called Smith. I suppose there must be a University called Jones, and Brown, probably an Evans and a Thatcher, even a Shufflebottom. How provincial we are, thinking universities must be called after towns, just cos we in the UK do it that way.

She announced about a year ago that she wanted to do research in women's studies in the US, no comments please Hunt, and I said fine, whizzo, you may do it on Third

Division North Football Teams, or Penny Black Plates for all I care, good luck to you lass, but once you have graduated, that's it, my petal. You are on your own. (Did I really mean it? It sounded to me as if I did. I was terribly stern. Well, at twenty-two, they have to push off in their own boat sometime.)

The problem has been to get funding. I began to feel sorry for her and all American parents of college-age children. These prospectuses came in from places like Smith and the fees and expenses for a year come to around 15,000 dollars. How can parents ever manage. We moan in little ole Britville, but ours are nothing like that. Tuition fees are free over here for natives. You just have to pay to keep them alive. Bread and gruel can be rather pricey these days.

We've had to advance some cash, as she'll have to live till the monies come through, and pay her air fare, but are we moaning, are we heckers. I've gone round the streets boasting. Our Caitlin is being paid to study in America. Beat that, you lot.

I'm sure we'll manage a trip out there, if just to prove that Clark exists. Hold on, it's in Mass. Not a religious place, I hope.

Oh, I see, it's in a town called Worcester. She'll find it cold in the winter, compared with California. Has she taken enough woollies, I wonder. She won't be able to go barefooted there. I hope her money really covers everything. Heating bills will be high. Should I have advanced more. Will food parcels help. What about vests.

What are we twitting on about. She's jolly well orf. The nest has been flown from. Our daughter the graduate has moved on.

Yup, she got a Top Second. Good huh. Better than me or her Mama, as we got Seconds. They were not officially graded at our places, though I bet mine was pretty good, probably a very High Middling To Top Second, might even have been a Top Super Out Of Sight Second. It could even have been an Almost First, but they didn't want to shame everyone else in my year.

She didn't go to the degree ceremony. Doesn't approve

of that sort of thing. My Mum came through from Carlisle to celebrate my Degree at Durham, with the next-door neighbour for company. My Dad was an invalid, confined to bed by then.

He never witnessed, alas, that touching moment when I was handed my Almost First on Palace Green, Durham, 1957. I then got my photograph taken by a lady called Daisy Edis who specialised for a hundred years in taking spotty Durham graduates in their hired gowns, then touching up their portraits so they looked like Robert Redford.

I have that very photo on my wall in front of me. My Mum used to have it over her bed, ahh, but there is no space for it where she is now. Nor would it mean very much to her either. I have the most remarkable, pure, lovely complexion in this photo, and such lush clean hair. In reality, I was all spots and had greasy hair. The Old Trout frequently reminds me of this, but I prefer the Daisy Edis version. That's me for ever, folks. Just don't change, Hunt. We like you as you are. Or almost were.

Jake has got one university photograph so far, in his college football team, but they're all mucking around and looking stupid and his face is rather blurry. I hope he gets a proper one taken next term.

I would have liked Caitlin to have gone to her Graduation ceremony, if only for the photograph. I know she would have hated to put on the stupid robes, and would probably have refused to be photographed, but she would have made an old man rather happy. I could have hung it over my bed for the next two years, while she's away. Ahhh.

Pardon My French

We arrived at Victoria with a screech of brakes, and then a screech of passengers, you stupid fool Hunt, look at the time, we're late, typical of your time-keeping, we'll probably miss her now and it will be all your fault.

Look, if you are going to be silly, we'll never find her, stop messing around and concentrate. She could already have come out of the side entrance, so pay attention. You have memorised what she looks like.

We were waiting for our French exchange, the very first our family has ever had. Caitlin and Jake never wanted an exchange, though at one time I was willing to swap them for anything, but Flora is much keener on French than either of them, and especially keen on getting herself to Paris for the next hols, rather than being dragged to the Lake District by the Wrinklies, do I have to.

Look at all the lonely people, where do they all come from. So many do seem dodgy, but are they the ones you read about, waiting to lure away innocent young provincial girls, or are they the young innocent provincial girls. There were hordes of them resigned and exhausted, single girls, standing by their belongings, now and again dragging their little mobile bags, their mobile lives, a few yards along to pretend to the world and themselves that they were not lost or stood up or runaways.

Battered mini-cabs fluttered around me, dropping people, chancing their hairy arms with the single girls, till they saw the juvenile cops and rattled off. The scruffiest, most dejected girl suddenly lit up and bounded into a Range Rover, screaming at Mummy and Daddy for being late. I'd

become convinced she was a really deprived runaway Slav, not a bleedin' Sloane. You never can tell.

Not more corny philosophy, said the OT, opening the back door and letting in Marion, our fourteen-year-old French friend, our *petite amie* for the next *semaine, bonjour ma petal*. She's come here to speak English, Hunt, so give us a break, huh.

It's rather strange, the way we got her. That makes her sound like a mail order supply, or something we won in a raffle. I mean how we came to be having Marion with us. We'd put the word around for months, writing to people, asking at Flora's school for any contacts, with no luck; then we remembered that almost twenty years ago my mother in Carlisle used to have French assistants from the grammar school. Gawd knows why, as there was hardly room in our council house for us, never mind frogs, but my Mum loved having them, and they liked staying.

She kept in contact with many of them for years, especially one called Madeleine, so we dug out her address and said heh, remember us, the family Davies from Carlisle, have you by chance a child of Flora's age, no swots or weeds please, must like clothes, reggae music, be mature for her age, artistic, interest in saxophone a plus, interest in sports a minus. We did not of course tell Flora about this dopey list—she would have screamed—but you have to begin somewhere if you're swapping human beings.

In a fortnight, it was all fixed up; they'd exchanged letters and photies and here she is. Most amazing of all is her name. Marion. Pronounced in the French way, of course, with a lot of rolling of the arse at the end. We did not know she existed, yet it turns out her name is partly in memory of my mother. Spelled exactly the same way. My mother has just died, two weeks before Marion arrived. One Marion has gone. A new one has come into our life.

They're in Flora's room now, what a noise of records, what a noise of talk. They've not stopped all week. Marion does not care much for reggae, and does not like Sade, one of Flora's all-time favourites. She loves David Bowie, yuck. She also liked Rupert Everett, whoever he is. We had this

conversation this evening at supper about handsome men, goodness knows how the topic came up—my presence, I shouldn't wonder—and Marion said she would like a poster of this Rupert creature in her bedroom. Flora said that in her opinion there were no beautiful men, they just did not exist, while she could name loads of beautiful women. (Must tell Caitlin that. Right on, sister.)

The OT, just to get her half-franc in, said what about Jean-Paul Belmondo, was not he handsome, she'd always liked the look of him. Flora and Marion stared at the OT as if she'd crept out of the Ark, or the overnight bus from Carlisle. Marion said Belmondo was not only old, but ugly. So that was him out.

And that's when I came to a surprising conclusion. I don't actually think Marion is French. Firstly the language. She doesn't understand a bloody word I say. How can this be. I did get O-Level French, Xmas resit I admit, but that's always harder. Even my trifically cunning bilingual jokes completely failed on her. An *oeuf* is an *oeuf*, I said at breakfast one morning. Not a glimmer. Not a titter.

Then the wine. She wouldn't have any. Just wanted Coke and that sort of rubbish. I thought you French took in wine with your mother's milk, *au lait* to bed, *au lait* to rise. Are you listening, Marion, that's actually a three-way jokeroo, you do speak Spanish, don't you. No, my other language at school is Russian.

We got on to films and we discovered she did not seem to know anything about M. Hulot, or have seen any of the films. All she wanted to talk about was *Room with a View*, which she loved. So we took her last night to *Maurice*. Said she liked it, but can one be sure. Not even sure we did. One afternoon Flora took her to *Wish You Were Here*, which she says she found harder to understand than *Maurice*, with the speed and slang, but is looking forward to going home and telling everyone she saw Emily Lloyd, in English.

Then the food. She was completely flummoxed by garlic bread, swearing she's never had it before, foony people these pretend Parisians. I know the Chinks never eat Pot Noodles and the Eyties don't know what spaghetti rings are, but

you'd have thought the French would understand garli
mon dew.

Last night we took her to a French-style restaurant i
Camden Town, the Brasserie, awfully nice, and we suggeste
to Marion that she had the *Crème Brûlée* for puddin
terribly good. She had no idea what I was on about. I'
realised by then she has a problem with well-spoken, Fiftie
French, so I held up the menu and pointed to the writin
Still she'd never heard of it, so I ordered one for her, bein
dead fluent. No sign of recognition. Quite liked it, but he
favourite pudding is still one they have all the time at hom
Her mother is always making it. Perhaps we'd heard of i
'Ahpel croombul.'

You what? We made her repeat it several times, an
suddenly that long low "a" in a croombul sounded familia
She's got a Northern English accent, picked up from he
mother, picked up from my mother. In her corner of Pari
there will always be a foreign field that is for ever Carlisl

The Finals Solution

I am a proud parent. Must be. For the last week people in the street have been saying well done and shoving cards of congratulations through the letterbox. Close friends have been stopping me on my walks and saying is it true, goodness, you must be proud.

I have always been a proud parent. I remember the Cutting of Caitlin's First Tooth. I rushed from work, there that shows how long ago it was, and bought her a little present on the way home. Jemima Puddle-duck. Inside there is still the inscription I wrote. To Caitlin Louise Penelope, on the Cutting of her First Tooth, August 14, 1964. I will cherish it for ever, even if no one else does, along with the actual baby teeth she later discarded and the locks of her little girl hair when it was so black she looked like Cleopatra. If not Cleopatra, Elizabeth Taylor acting Cleopatra. If not her, oh forget it.

When Caitlin started to read *Janet and John*, that was trific, but I think when she went on to be able to paint and draw and act and in fact do most artistic things ever so nicely, then I was well proud, being totally without artistic talents myself. Wonder whose side of the family she gets it from.

Caitlin showed from an early age one particular skill which knocked me out. She could understand instructions, the written sort, when you buy a new gadget and it comes with twenty pages of gibberish. You say I know, let's play this new game, then you open the box, see the rules, and say no, let's not play this new game. Caitlin always rescued us. And always won.

Jake, our second born, was not such a proud-maker when he was young, in fact he drove us round the bend till he was five. Never slept all night once, in five long years. So hyperactive we were permanently exhausted. His aim in life seemed to be to shove his fingers in the light plugs and electrocute himself. He was so late at learning to read we did consider having him tested.

He drove many of his primary school teachers potty as well, as no class could be taught till Jake was settled. But by the end of his primary days, he had become a Tower of Strength. Not through being big and strong; in fact till he was thirteen he was, now, how shall I put this, I could still get thumped, he was chubby. What happened was that he became Responsible. He could be relied upon. He became captain of his primary school football team, not through being the best player, but by being dependable. And that year they won the league. Good, huh.

Flora, our little flower, our youngest petal, also has the artistic talents denied to the males in this family. Sometimes I feel a mere passenger. The OT, as a gel, was good at everything, the creep, so now you know where these skills come from. Personally, I don't believe in heredity. It's like astrology. Looking back, you can make it prove anything.

I'm always vee proud when Flora picks up her saxophone, which she is teaching herself, and gets a sound out of it, any sound, how does she do it.

Last year, when she was in the school play, *A View from the Bridge*, my little cup was overflowing, just to see her up there, acting in an American accent. I can't do any accents, never mind act. The OT, don't get her started, but her Oz accent is quite good, for someone from Carlisle.

These talents, these skills, are not of course exceptional, just that all parents are amazed when their children can do anything, most of all when it's something they can't do themselves. And the nice point about having them is that they are interests, outlets, amusements for life, whether they are developed or not.

That was one of the drags about Jake, in his middle-teen years, moping about the house, refusing to do anything, join

anything, go anywhere, whereas les gels were never in, always usefully employed. It wasn't till the Sixth Form that he had another change of persona. Now I believe in that. Every seven years, they move into a new skin, a new character. You can't see it ahead, can't predict exactly what will happen, but when you look back, you see clues which you never quite understood at the time, signs that did not quite make sense.

Our news, this week, concerns Dear Jake. Close followers will know that he has been at university these last three years. But ah-ha, even very close followers, reading between the lines, studying Hunt's tea-leaves, will not know where. He has not allowed me to name it. It doesn't matter, Hunt, so I don't want it mentioned, is that clear?

I have referred to him being in a college, but that left the field open, as there are several collegiate universities, from London to Durham. Hold on, it could not have been Durham, alas, as I said I was ever so sad that none of our lot wanted to go there. Hmm, perhaps I did give some hints, drop a few clues by chance, oh stop messing around Hunt and just get on with it. Jake has been at Cambridge.

Note the past tense. As I write, he has another week to go, then after that he is an ex-student, ex-dependent on his poor parents, out into the world, that'll really larn him. So as you read this, he has finished. It doesn't matter any more where he was, even if it ever did.

I was over the moon, Brian, when this year he became captain of his college football team. Good, huh. But he rang last night to tell us something even more remarkable, something his dear mama and certainly not his poor papa ever managed. Or expected. He's got a First.

Meaningless to many people, unless you are up on or in these things. We rang Arthur, his grandad in Carlisle, aged 87¼. And he said, 'Is there money in it, then?' We had American friends with us, the day he rang, and it meant little to them either, as their system is different.

I went for my evening walk, hoping to meet neighbours, hoping they'd say heh, isn't it Jake's Finals, how did he do, but I kept on meeting remote people, a doctor we used to

have twenty years ago, a bloke I once played football with, then the daughter of the local grocer, and I failed with all of them to turn the subject round to Jake. Pathetic, isn't it. Nothing to do with me, yet here I am, looking for reflected glory, coming on the pride. As if after all these years I didn't know it wasn't English, not middle-class, to boast. One must do it elliptically.

The OT says she is not a Proud Parent. She is not unproud, just that proud is not the word she would use. Happy for Jake, pleased for him. She prefers to reserve pride for different achievements. Oh, you know, being very kind and understanding and helpful to someone, being morally brave, making a stand, that sort of Boy Scout stuff. I just think it's good, huh.

The Graduate

We were just leaving for Cambridge, going to see our dear son graduating, when the phone rang. It was our dear son, panicking.

'Fank Gawd I got you,' said Jake. 'Was beginning to fink you'd gone.'

Yes my petal, my wonderkin, my baba, what can us do for you.

'I haven't got a shirt, so can you bring one. Must be white. And I ain't got no shoes. They must be black. Fanks.' Peep, peep, peep.

I fell to wondering what would have happened had he read English, whether his North London tones might have been held against him, or would that fortune I didn't spend on his comprehensive education have been a handicap. Meanwhile, the OT bustled around, doing women's work. I'm not looking for his stupid shoes, do you mind. We're going to be late, hurry up.

She came out to the car holding a pair of vintage trainers, once white, in the distant past, chuntering on about dyeing them black, had she got time, would they do, would they be acceptable. Give me strength, I said, getting out of the car.

I found an old pair of my shoes at the bottom of my cupboard and my one and only white shirt, that one with the long collar, you must remember it, rather fetching I always thought, worn with a kipper tie. (I'm about to win a bet with Flora. Kipper ties are coming back, oh yes they are. Next we'll see the return of flares. Then I'll really clean up.)

On the way to Cambridge, I reminisced. I do this constantly, looking back on this time last week, or heh, remember what we were doing yesterday. Having a whole three years, wow, what a feast of nostalgia. Now which was the pub we went to the day we took him up, back in October, 1985. What about his first room, wasn't that weird.

Cambridge has been part of our life, these last three years, taking him up at the beginning of each term, lugging his 2,000 reggae records, then bringing him back at the end of each term, and his 2,000 stupid records. We've always made a day of it, walks up the river, walks to Granchester, plus lunch, then a look round the bookshops. Brighton was also part of our life for three years, when dear Caitlin was a student. Much preferred that. Cheaper bookshops, longer walks, far better restaurants. Much more fun in Brighton.

Now both towns will disappear from the routine of our life, if not from our memories. Unless Flora goes to either of them. Hope she goes somewhere different. With even cheaper secondhand bookshops. She says she's not going anywhere. She's pig-sick of the topic of universities. Had it up to here, every bloody meal for the last five years, give us a break, for God's sake.

You've also moaned for the last five years, said the OT, oh yes you have. You've complained non-stop about the driving, suggesting they should get the train or the bus. Such a short time in their life, and you've been so selfish.

It's true I hate driving. In our day, tra la, with car-less parents, it never arose. You relied on trunks which arrived each term, just as you were leaving. Mummies and Daddies were well out of it, in our day.

Hold on, wait for it, the old mind is turning over. My mother did come to my graduation, in Durham in 1957. Mrs Forsyth, a neighbour, came with her. I can see her now, having tea in the Master's Garden afterwards.

The OT has no real memory of her own graduation, from Oxford in 1960. She says she went, but her best friend from college, who happens to be staying with us at present, says she didn't. Nobody went in those days. The OT has a clearer memory of my graduation. She can see herself sitting in the

Cathedral for the ceremony beside John Davies's dad.

'This is the proudest moment in my life,' he said. Then fell asleep.

We reached Cambridge and went up to Jake's room. What a midden. Even worse than usual. There were flies hovering over the empty milk cartons and mould on the filthy cutlery. He'd just had his hair cut, so short it was practically a skinhead. And he refused to wear the old shoes we'd brought. Said they had holes in. He can talk. What a cheek.

There were worse moans when I produced my video camera and put a new tape in, ready to capture a lovely day. Oh Gawd, no, stop it Hunt, I don't want to be filmed. I got out my camera, my sturdy Olympus Trip. And I don't want to be photographed either.

So selfish, the younger generation. Our three are all the same. The moment I try to snap them, they go mad. I don't really enjoy it, but it's got to be done, it's what modern memories are all about, innit. Oh yes, you moan now, but when you're old and grey like me, cut grey, grey I'm certainly not, who mentioned grey, then you'll thank me for having captured some of the wonderful moments in your life.

They all assembled in one of the courtyards for their official college photo. All 130 or so of the people from his college, graduating that day. Jake was about the last to climb up on the tall benches at the back. He'd finally got all his posh gear on, with a lot of bending and twisting, moaning and groaning. He looked pretty impressive, in his gown and hood and funny tie thing they wear, and for a moment I thought what have I spawned, he could be a skinhead Etonian.

Then I saw his feet. He was wearing his old slippers, my old slippers, in fact I think they were my Mum's old slippers, Carlisle Co-op, circa 1971. Horrible brown mocassin things. The Head Porter was checking all the students, making sure they were properly dressed. Jake managed it, just in time. One of his friends came rushing up with a pair of shoes in a plastic bag. Looks brill on my video, but not a word to

the Young Master. He doesn't know I caught him, ha ha. Could be coming to your local Odeon soon.

We were not allowed to film or photograph in the Senate House, for the actual ceremony. Pretty boring anyway. An old gadgie in a red gown muttering miles below in Latin. Who wants to capture that. Thank goodness Flora didn't come, though she'd half fancied the day off school. It was like a conveyor belt, all the colleges going through, one by one. The OT had forgotten her specs, but it was quite easy to spot Jake, even from above. Look for the headful of skin, my dear.

The best bit was afterwards, tea in one of his college's many beautiful quads, God they're so lucky, these Oxbridge people. I got in early with my camera, just as the long trestle tables were being set out, the starched white tablecloths gently billowing, the maids and butlers standing waiting in their black and white uniforms, ready to serve the Young Gentlemen. And Young Women. All equal now.

The parents were all dressed up and loving it. I even wore a suit, my old Marks and Spencer lightweight one, blue with stripes. As the Father of a First I really thought I had to make some extra special effort. No tie, though. There are limits, even on a special day.

So that's it. The end of Jake's student life. Another graduate, ready to do whatever graduates do. Don't ask me. Everyone in the street already has. He says his ambition is to go south, live on a beach, play football and never wear a tie.

Swan Song

This Is It, the Big News, the thing you have all been dreading. I'm calling it a day. Goodbye Father's Day. Pause for little tears.

Flora turned sixteen on Hallowe'en while the other two are out there, somewhere, practically at pensionable age, so can I really call myself a Father of Children any more? Can I keep turning this out, when my raw material, my home-grown copy, keeps running away.

If only I'd made this all up, created a fictional family, I could by now have started recycling all the old stuff. I have a friend, just died, Charles Norman de Courcy Parry, who did a hunting column in a magazine for fifty-three years. Every five years, so he boasted, he used the same material again. He maintained that the memory span of all readers lasts only five years. Lucky.

I suppose I could hang on, treading water, till Grandfather's Day, but goodness knows when that will come, if ever, not the way this lot is carrying on. The OT has put her favourite children's books away, and carefully cleaned that ever so nice coat Caitlin looked lovely in and that felt hat which Jake wore. We've just got back from a friend the wickerwork cradle they were all born in , which has now seen twenty babies in twenty-five years. It sits in our bedroom, mocking us. When will it be used again? And what about my best stamp swaps and the old trains I've been keeping so lovingly. Will any new little members of the human race make use of them? Fat chance.

It all began ten years ago. Alan Coren, of blessed memory, said try it for four weeks, let's have a Dad's view, as a

change from all those *Guardian* women. I've always looked upon it as a letter to My Mum, another Blessed Memory. You know how you rabbit on about the family tittle-tattle of the week, flamming up the smallest things, not actually telling lies, just missing out the horrible things which happen, the sort which would just depress. We've had our share of those.

This is column number 428. I've numbered them all, since 17 October, 1979. Never missed one through illness, just hols, hardly any bad language, nothing to offend Old Trouts of any age or sex, guaranteed safe and germ-free. You could take Father's Day anywhere. It even became a hardback book, then a paperback, then, blow me, a TV series, which I refused to write, saying the idea is stupid, how can such a skittery thing go on the telly, but it ran for two years. John Alderton was me. Bet you don't remember that.

Right, a few unfinished bits of business. My bread, as you've asked, did not win first prize or any prize at the Loweswater Show. But am I deterred, am I sulking, certainly not. I'm still at it, the OT's pride and joy, baking away. So think of me, from henceforth, of a Sunday morning, turning out my three treacle loaves, one round and two long.

Of course, the real unfinished business is les enfants. We still don't know what will happen to Jake, nor does the world. After three weeks as a porter at Harrods, he got a better paid job, as a labourer. He now waits for the call expected any day now, to go abroad to teach English somewhere, possibly maybe Italy, perhaps just for a year. Then what? Maybe possibly something else. Is he too well qualified, with his brillo degree. I can't wait to find out whatever it is he will find out, about life, the universe, and wearing a tie.

Dear Caitlin has been home for Christmas from Worcester, Mass., hurrah, and is now applying to do further research at various American universities. Will she get a place. Will she get the funds. Will Big Hunt be asked to help. What will he say. Can't wait to find out, whatever it is he is going to find out.

And this is Little Flora's GCSE year, the first exams in

her life, after all that industrial action which her generation has suffered. How will she turn out when it comes to the things that really matter, such as life, the universe and Oxford Street. Still says she won't try for university. Pig sick of that subject.

The Old Trout swims on, one thing at a time, nothing stupid, doing things properly, with another novel offering out soon. Not got a new biog subject, so far. Who will she think of. Whose life will we have to share at meal-times for the next five years.

I have so much on, don't ask me, okay thanks, feared you never would. Apart from my Columbus biog, which is for the 1992 celebrations, so I'm well ahead, I've taken on a really mad project for Penguin. It means writing a teenage book a month for a year. Don't say it. I must be off my trolley. But it is a most exciting, nay unique creation. That's really the reason I'm packing up now.

My wrist is knackered already.

But the big problem is, what am I going to do on Saturday evenings from now on? That's when I've always knocked this out, my little bit of fun, two hours of pleasure, after a week down the mines.

For a whole decade, I've built a life round it. If it's Saturday, it's jumblies in the morning, football in the afternoon, then I have a run, a bath, put on my track suit which everyone hates, and at six o'clock sharp, bingo, time for Father's Day, and I go up to my little room, and talk to myself.

Now what? How can I fill Saturday nights? Read, says the OT. Rave, says Flora.

They're all pleased, the three enfants. They're fed up with me embarrassing them. So that's another reason to retire. Oh well, I suppose I'd better say sorry to them. Sor-ree.

But we've had some fun, you and me, haven't we. And the fan letters, mon dew, sackfuls of them. Fanks, but can't say I'll miss replying to them in the future.

Tell you what. Possibly maybe, I'll do a round robin letter, once a year, for ever, just to tell you what happens to Flora, Jake and Caitlin, on the rest of their road through

life. If you send a stamped addressed envelope. I'm not paying. Bloody hell. I'm giving up an income.

What have I learned? Not a lot. When it comes to parenthood, you can't teach much, can't pass on experience, just amuse, let people know they're not alone.

It won't last. That's one Christmas cracker motto I don't mind passing on. Every seven years, they change, not just physically, but their personalities. Looking back at our big ones, I can hardly recognise them at seven, or at fourteen. Will they change again? Or is this it? That's what I don't know. But up to 21, don't bank on anything. Don't either boast, because aren't they doing well, so polite, so lovely, or get too depressed and blame yourself. Either way, the chances are it will change.

I don't think Philip Larkin got it right. If you believe 'they fuck you up your Mum and Dad,' gosh first rude work in ten years, then by the same token, we got fucked up by our Mums and Dads, so it's a pointless observation, unless you want to use it as a cop-out. I think on the whole they don't, your Mum and Dad. It's what's inside that matters most. When it comes out, you can't do much about it. Just keep smiling, be there, take each game as it comes, etc, but you know all that.

Ten years then. Goodness. In any family it's a pretty long time. It seems only yesterday that Caitlin had her first teenage party, and you'll never guess what happened when these yobbos found the fridge was still full of stuff oh no Hunt, don't start that again.

So I won't. Bye.

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